

“A Contrariety of Emotion”: Jane Austen’s Ambivalent Lovers in *Pride and Prejudice*

BRUCE STOVEL, *University of Alberta*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “ambivalence” as “the coexistence in one person of the emotional attitudes of love and hate, or other opposite feelings, towards the same object or situation,” and this concept would seem to apply precisely to *Pride and Prejudice*. During the first half of the novel, the central couple, Elizabeth and Darcy, are held together by just such contradictory feelings. Like Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, each is the one the other loves to hate—and hates to love. And, like Beatrice and Benedick, the two lovers are matched in every way, including disdain for the other, and each finds the other a fascinating and inescapable object of attention. Yet that unwilling attraction to the other makes each hate the other as a threat to his or her pride and emotional independence. But one lover’s expression of this hatred only increases the other’s fascination; the power of the fascination increases the threat, which intensifies the expressions of hatred. This vicious circle can only be broken when the lovers fully accept their love and dismiss their hatred—that is, when their feelings for each other are no longer ambivalent.

Yet “ambivalence” is a word which entered the language only in this century, so it is well to be cautious in applying it to *Pride and Prejudice*. Not only was Jane Austen’s novel composed almost 200 years ago, but in it she seems to attack love-as-attraction, a notion presupposed in the idea of emotional ambivalence. We know that the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*, written in 1796-97, was called “First Impressions”; though Jane Austen dropped the title before her novel was published in 1813 (another novel with that title had been published in 1801),¹ she suggests why she chose the original title late in the novel, after Elizabeth has seen the change in Darcy’s manners at Pemberley and feels it can only be due to her influence: “If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth’s change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill-success might perhaps authorize her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment.”² Like *Sense and Sensibility*, the one novel that precedes it in Jane Austen’s career, *Pride and Prejudice* seems designed to discredit romantic love, or love at first sight, and to elevate instead “a less interesting mode of attachment”: love grounded in a knowledge of the other’s character.

Apart from the question of authorial intention, there is another reason for caution: many of Austen’s most persuasive critics see no such ambivalence in the attitudes of Elizabeth and Darcy towards each other. True, many readers have clearly delighted in the lovers’ ambivalence, whether or not the term was in existence

¹See the Introductory Note in R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd ed., II: *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. xi- xiii.

²*Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Chapman, p. 279. All references are to this edition.

to describe it. The anonymous reviewer of the novel in *The British Critic* for March, 1813, for instance, says of Elizabeth, "She is in fact the *Beatrice* of the tale; and falls in love on much the same principles of contrariety."³ Writing in 1917, Reginald Farrer argued that, as in *Emma*, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* is "subconsciously . . . in love with" the hero from the start—but that in the earlier novel the author failed to make her heroine's real feelings clear.⁴ And several modern critics consider Darcy's and Elizabeth's feelings towards each other as ambivalent, though none, to my knowledge, uses the term; David Monaghan, for example, notes that Elizabeth's acts of rudeness to Darcy "derive from an unconscious need to deny that, for all his faults, she finds Darcy attractive."⁵ On the other hand, many acute modern commentators find no such depth psychology in *Pride and Prejudice*. Susan Morgan, for example, says, "For much of the story, Mr. Darcy cares for Elizabeth in spite of herself, and she does not care for him at all."⁶ And Joseph Wiesenfarth says much the same: "Darcy comes to think that Elizabeth loves him whereas she could not care less for him because of the way she feels about his treatment of Jane and of Wickham."⁷ Howard S. Babb says of Elizabeth that "the opposition of her whole nature to Darcy" brings about "the chief dramatic effect of the story: overwhelming surprise at his first proposal."⁸ And Marilyn Butler, in her convincing account of Jane Austen's moral thinking, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, suggests that Jane Austen meant to ridicule the whole notion of love at first sight by offering hate at first sight: "It is clear that to her love at first sight and hate at first sight are essentially the same. Both are emotional responses, built on insufficient or wrong evidence, and fostered by pride or complacency toward the unreliable subjective consciousness." Thus, she believes, the second half of the novel is necessarily drawn out: "Jane Austen has to allow time . . . for Elizabeth to change her emotional antipathy to Darcy into a predisposition to love him."⁹

Butler, Babb, Wiesenfarth, and Morgan are all primarily concerned with tracing the moral changes within Austen's protagonists; they analyze moral patterns embedded within Austen's plot, characters, and authorial commentary and show little interest in psychological analysis. But *Pride and Prejudice* is comic, and comedy has a both/and rather than an either/or vision. The novel invites us to see in its protagonists both a moral pattern and a psychological state, just as its plot shows Elizabeth and Darcy each combining, by the end, the apparent opposites of pride and humility, just as Elizabeth learns to combine her sister's charity with her own judgment, just as the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth unites the unalloyed calculation embodied in the hasty and furtive union of Collins and Charlotte with the unalloyed impulse embodied in the equally hasty and furtive union of Wickham and Lydia. This harmonizing, inclusive vision has irony as its technical instrument. What is stated is less important than what is implied. Jane Austen was speaking of *Pride and Prejudice* when, in a letter to her sister, she adapted a couplet from Scott to describe her style: "I do not write for such dull elves / As have not a great deal

³Cited from *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 44.

⁴Farrer, "Jane Austen," *Quarterly Review*, 228 (1917), 1-30; cited here from *Pride and Prejudice*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 344.

⁵David Monaghan, *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 66.

⁶Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 82.

⁷Joseph Wiesenfarth, *The Errand of Form: An Essay of Jane Austen's Art* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1967), p. 63.

⁸Howard S. Babb, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), pp. 136, 114.

⁹Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 213, 209.

of ingenuity themselves.”¹⁰ Thus any one act or speech in the novel may carry both a moral and a psychological sense, and each sense will then support the other. Elizabeth, for instance, tells Jane at the start of Volume Two that “There are few people whom I really love, and fewer still of whom I think well” (p. 135). Morally, Elizabeth is engaged in protecting herself from her own sharp intelligence: she has been humiliated by Charlotte’s defection, but rather than asking why she has been so mistaken about Charlotte’s character, she considers Charlotte’s choice of Collins unaccountable and the world unsatisfactory. At the same time, she reminds us of her psychological predicament: she cannot think well of the people (Darcy included) whom she loves. The moral and psychological implications do not conflict, but illuminate and enrich each other.

Therefore, the question of authorial intention should be approached with this sense of the novel’s comic and ironic inclusiveness in mind. Jane Austen may well be presenting in Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship both an ideal form of love, one grounded in a well-tested respect for each other’s character, and a more immediate and magnetic attraction. If we think about the passage in which she defends Elizabeth’s “less interesting mode of attachment,” several counterbalancing implications emerge. For one thing, the novel shows that Bingley and Jane loved each other deeply and truly from their first meeting. “Oh! she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld,” the smitten Bingley says of Jane at the Meryton assembly (p. 11). Furthermore, Elizabeth did not actually give romantic love much of a trial in her partiality for Wickham, since he appeals to Elizabeth, not in himself, but as a weapon she can use in her merry war against Darcy. When we are told, “Elizabeth thought with pleasure of dancing a great deal with Wickham,” the sentence continues, “and of seeing a confirmation of everything in Mr. Darcy’s looks and behaviour” (p. 86). If her response to Wickham shows the unreliability of immediate physical attraction as a basis for love, it also shows the strength of the unacknowledged attraction that binds Elizabeth to Darcy. And if Jane Austen’s defence of “the other less interesting mode of attachment” insists that the rational love between her central pair possesses dignity, serenity, and security, that does not preclude their having reached this plateau in Volume Three by a less than smooth and straightforward path during Volumes One and Two. Their attainment of rational love is all the more impressive when we realize the deeply irrational impulses from which it has grown.

In fact, virtually all of Jane Austen’s pronouncements on Elizabeth’s feelings towards Darcy occur in the second half of the novel: once his letter has been received, Darcy himself is largely absent—but Elizabeth’s need to define her attitude towards him is pressing, and so we follow Elizabeth as she reviews “the whole of their acquaintance, so full of contradictions and contrarities” (p. 279) and moves from credence to respect to approval to esteem to gratitude to affection and the realization that “he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her” (p. 312). But in the first half of the novel, Darcy, with all his dispositions and talents, is before Elizabeth, at least for the most part, and there is no occasion for her to define her feelings about him, since those feelings are of no real interest to her. If she notices during her stay at Netherfield that Mr. Darcy looks at her frequently, she assumes it must be caused by marked disapproval, and decides, “She liked him too little to care for his approbation” (p. 51). Apart from this one ironic summary—ironic because Elizabeth cannot see how much she does like Darcy, how much she does care for his approbation—the novel’s hero remains during these scenes, to the heroine, simply “*that* abominable Mr. Darcy” (p. 144).

In short, despite the novel’s original title and the author’s comment upon the nature of love, nothing in the novel invalidates, and much encourages, the view

¹⁰Letter of January 29, 1813, cited from *Jane Austen’s Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 298.

that Jane Austen invites us to contemplate a hero and heroine who get to know each other by loving to hate and hating to love. When, halfway through the novel, Elizabeth is forced by Darcy's letter to look back over her thoughts and actions, she castigates herself in very suggestive terms: "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" (p. 208). Elizabeth, it would seem, even in her great moment of self-recognition, is still protecting herself from full self-knowledge. A further clue to the presence of irony here lies in Elizabeth's self-accusation of vanity, and not pride. In the fifth chapter, Mary Bennet proudly distinguishes between these two apparent synonyms: "Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us" (p. 20); Darcy continues this distinction six chapters later, replying, when Elizabeth obliquely accuses him of vanity and pride: "Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation" (p. 57). In short, Elizabeth should accuse herself of pride in her own superiority of mind, not vanity. Like Darcy, she is proud to be vain—and too proud to admit, at least yet, that she has been so wretchedly blind just because she *has* been in love.¹¹ Love, not vanity, has been her folly, but this fool will persist in her folly and become wise.

Elizabeth and Darcy, then, neither love nor hate at first sight, but fall quickly into a love/hate relationship which they do not recognize as such. Elizabeth admits something of the sort when Jane asks her at the end of the novel how long she has loved Darcy: "It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began" (p. 373). Darcy, by the way, makes the same confession to Elizabeth: "I was in the middle, before I knew I *had* begun" (p. 380). This ambivalence is highlighted by the symmetrical way in which each lover's feelings mirror the other's during the three main sections of the novel: the episodes leading up to Darcy's proposal; the proposal scene and ensuing letter (which together form the novel's center); and the whole second half of the novel, which follows from this central episode.

During the first section of the novel, the two lovers seem to be in different predicaments: Darcy is aware that he loves, and makes conscious advances toward Elizabeth; she is unaware of the love she feels for him, and her advances toward him are unintentional. At the same time, though, the lovers, as lovers, are mirror images of each other: each loves and yet struggles to conquer that love. If Darcy finds, after spending two days in Elizabeth's company at Netherfield, that "She attracted him more than he liked" (p. 60), Elizabeth has exactly the same divided response to him, although she does not realize it. And so she flirts with Darcy: she teases him, taunts him, quarrels with his statements, throws his past words in his face, points out his character defects, criticizes his treatment of his friends and his enemies, takes delight in vexing him—all without realizing that her assumption of easy freedom and intimate concern encourages him to believe that she sees his love and welcomes it. Like Emma with Mr. Elton, Elizabeth must make the humiliating discovery that she has led her suitor on to propose: "I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses," Darcy tells her at the novel's end (p. 396). There is ironic accuracy, then, in Darcy's statement to her at Rosings: "I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance long enough to know, that you find great enjoyment in expressing opinions which in fact are not your own" (p. 174). Jane Austen leaves Elizabeth's viewpoint frequently during Volume One to give us glimpses of Darcy's growing love and of his struggle against that love; these glimpses force us to see Elizabeth's

¹¹Andrew H. Wright has noted this irony. See *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), pp. 113-14.

comic ignorance, not only of Darcy's inner conflict, but, by implication, of her own as well.¹²

Darcy's proposal culminates and epitomizes this ambivalent courtship. His offer of marriage is meant to express his love, but unintentionally expresses hatred: he confesses that he proposes against his will, against his reason, and even against his character (p. 169). Elizabeth, on the other hand, is vehement in her anger and intends to wound, yet her very vehemence is a sign that she feels more than she realizes. This is part of the point in Austen's careful paralleling of Mr. Collins' proposal to Elizabeth with Darcy's. Elizabeth feels no anger towards Collins, no matter how insulting he becomes (and he does tell her that she is unlikely ever to receive another offer of marriage, since her expectations only amount to one thousand pounds in the four per cents). Collins is a fool, and Elizabeth knows that "His regard for her was quite imaginary" (p. 112). On the other hand, she realizes that Darcy is more worthy of her and does, in his way, love her, but with a love that undervalues her own, and this is why she is so hurt and vindictive in their great confrontation.

Elizabeth's accusations instigate Darcy to write his long letter to her. It is this letter and not Darcy's proposal which constitutes "the chief dramatic effect of the story" (to use the words of Babb quoted above): Elizabeth may feel overwhelming surprise when Darcy proposes, but we hardly do, since Jane Austen has prepared us for it by the narrative shifts to Darcy's viewpoint during Volume One and by an increasingly obvious serious of hints during the scenes at Rosings (a series something like those signs of Elton's intentions which Emma resolutely ignores). The letter, however, is completely unexpected, and creates a decisive change in the relationship of Elizabeth and Darcy. And, like the proposal, the letter epitomizes the ambivalent feelings of both the speaker and his auditor. Darcy begins in bitter hauteur—"Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you" (p. 197)—and the tone of wounded pride, of vindicating himself at her expense, is clear when he appeals to her justice and refers to the letter as "the explanation which is due to myself" (p. 197). But, despite appearances, Darcy's letter is really a love letter, as his candor, his scrupulous fairness, his respect for Elizabeth's judgment, the care with which he accounts for his actions, and the confidential revelation about Wickham's attempted seduction of his sister all confess. The letter ends with a sentence, "I will only add, God bless you," which Elizabeth considers to be "charity itself" (p. 368). If the letter is written out of divided feelings, Elizabeth responds to it with "a contrariety of emotion . . . Her feelings as she read were scarcely to be defined" (p. 204). At a first reading, "It was all insolence and pride" (p. 204); she is then indignant, incredulous, ashamed, humiliated in turn. After two hours of wandering in the Hunsford lane, "giving way to every variety of thought," she returns home, fatigued by "a change so sudden and so important" (p. 209). That change is summarized by Elizabeth's reflections after she meets Darcy again at Pemberley some four months later: "She lay awake two whole hours trying to make [her feelings] out. She certainly did not hate him. Hatred had vanished long ago, and she had almost as long been ashamed of ever feeling a dislike against him, that could be so called" (p. 265).

These last words suggest the change which occurs within both Elizabeth and Darcy during the second half of the novel: not only does hatred of the other vanish,

¹²E. M. Halliday makes some important points about the effect of these changes in narrative viewpoint in his article, "Narrative Perspective in *Pride and Prejudice*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 15 (1960), 65-71. The article is reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of the novel and in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice**, ed. E. Rubinstein (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

but its place is taken by shame and humiliation, hatred turned inward. Elizabeth cries, "How despicably have I acted!" (p. 208), about her treatment of Darcy, and he says of his proposal to her, "I cannot think of it without abhorrence" (p. 367). In the first half of the novel, each directed hatred outward in order to protect a love turned inward, a self-love: what Darcy says in the closing pages is equally true of Elizabeth: "I was . . . allowed, encouraged, almost taught . . . to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to *wish* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own" (p. 369). In the second half, each of them, by a painful act of will caused by the need to love and be loved, reverses this emotional balance, and loves outwardly and hates inwardly. Each finds that mutual love is preferable to self-love enjoyed in isolation. By an elegant homeopathy of the emotions, the expression of hatred has driven out hatred in each case. "How you must have hated me after *that* evening?" Elizabeth asks Darcy at the novel's end, and he replies, "Hate you! I was angry at first, but my anger soon began to take a proper direction" (p. 369). And Darcy says that his letter contained "some expressions which might justly make you hate me" (p. 368)—but, of course, Elizabeth learns Darcy's letter by heart, studies every sentence of it, reveals it to no one, and "her anger was soon turned toward herself" (p. 189). This inner redirection causes a change in behavior, and each lover moves, tentatively and indirectly, toward the other. Darcy's manners are transformed, and he rescues the Bennet family from disgrace, even becoming best man at Wickham's marriage to Lydia; Elizabeth allows herself to be taken to Pemberley and, after meeting Darcy there, instinctively seeks his sympathy and help by telling him of Lydia's elopement (a confession which parallels and answers his unprovoked confession about *his* sister's relations with Wickham). And, amusingly, as love replaces ambivalence in Elizabeth and Darcy, humility and diffidence supplant pride and prejudice, so that their sparkling duels of wit give way to tongue-tied, blushing, floor-scrutinizing encounters that would make Bingley and Jane seem brash and poised by comparison. At the novel's end, the two of them, and all of us, can be grateful, not only to Lady Catherine's attempts to separate them, but to the ambivalence which drew them together. ♣

This psychology of ambivalence is not evident in *Sense and Sensibility*¹³ or any of the obvious models for *Pride and Prejudice*, such as Fanny Burney's *Evelina*. Where did Jane Austen discover this new and rich conception? We will never know, of course, but it is interesting to speculate. The idea is consistent with the thinking of Samuel Johnson, Jane Austen's particular authority on moral and religious questions: "Inconsistencies," Imlac points out in Chapter Eight of Johnson's *Rasselas*, "cannot be right, but, imputed to man, they may both be true." Richardson's self-divided and self-contradictory lovers—particularly Lovelace and Clarissa—may have contributed something to Jane Austen's psychology of love. Perhaps the literary precursors of Elizabeth and Darcy are the wilful heroes and heroines of stage comedy: Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick, but also their progeny on the Restoration and eighteenth-century stage, such as Congreve's Mirabell and Millamant. The real source for Elizabeth and Darcy, however, was probably Jane Austen's observation of actual people. Just as many, perhaps most, readers of *Pride and Prejudice* are reminded of real-life counterparts of Mr. Bennet (whose character also lacks a clear literary precedent), so versions of the Elizabeth-Darcy mating dance abound in everyday life. It is a striking fact that the Beatrice-Benedick plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* is the one story in all of Shakespeare's plays that has no known literary source. Similarly, Jane Austen might well have said of Elizabeth Bennet's contrariety of emotion what she says about her heroine at the end of

¹³A first version of *Sense and Sensibility*, entitled *Elinor and Marianne*, was completed before Jane Austen began *First Impressions* in late 1796. See Chapman's Introductory Note, p. xi.

Northanger Abbey. After explaining that Henry Tilney came to love Catherine Morland simply because he could see that she loved him, Jane Austen adds, "It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine's dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own."¹⁴

¹⁴*The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd ed., V: *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 243.