

The Individualization of Elizabeth Bennet

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Midway through *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet arrives at a moment of self-awakening which, notably, results from the influence of someone else: Fitzwilliam Darcy. For critic Susan Fraiman, this complication amounts to no less than, as she titles her article, “The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet.” From this moment forward, according to Fraiman, Elizabeth Bennet ceases to think for herself. She submits to Darcy as to a second father, relinquishes her trust in her own judgments, and thereby suffers a “loss of clout.”¹ This pivotal moment comes because, after Elizabeth has rejected his proposal, Darcy justifies himself in a lengthy letter. It is true that Darcy claims that he has not, as Elizabeth has charged, separated Elizabeth’s sister Jane from Jane’s suitor, Mr. Bingley, “regardless of the sentiments of either” (127); neither has he inappropriately cut off Wickham, his childhood companion and son of his late father’s steward, from a promised career as a clergyman.² Darcy’s version of events challenges the talent in which Elizabeth prides herself most: her ability to judge character. Yet Fraiman maintains that “Darcy’s letter saps [Elizabeth’s] power to comprehend”: that is, that Darcy’s logic undermines Elizabeth’s own and, furthermore, that Darcy designs his letter to “inflict” pain on Elizabeth. By allowing Darcy’s logic to supersede her own, and receiving with “enthusiasm” the pain that he inflicts, Elizabeth accepts this “humiliation.”³ Although Elizabeth comes to agree that Darcy’s previous actions were indeed justified, Fraiman incorrectly assumes that this transformation “disables” Elizabeth’s capacity to arrive at,

and act upon, her own judgments. On the contrary, Darcy's letter strengthens Elizabeth's independence of mind. By accepting the fact that she has misjudged Darcy, Wickham, Jane, and Bingley, Elizabeth sharpens her ability to discern character. In turn, she develops a solidly based self-confidence.

Before Elizabeth's independent judgments can be formed, she must work her way painstakingly out of her existing prejudice. It is true that Darcy essentially forces his letter into Elizabeth's consciousness. He has no other choice. The day after Elizabeth has rejected him, he waits along the path where she takes her morning walks, waylays her when she tries to avoid him, and even then must thrust his letter at her. Elizabeth's impetus to free herself from her initial prejudice against Darcy is, thus, involuntary. Because Elizabeth naturally seeks truth, she "instinctively" (129) takes the letter from the hands of this man who has so offended her that she cannot believe "any apology to be in his power" (134). Unable to shut out all reason completely, Elizabeth begins to move beyond her hatred. "With the strongest curiosity," (129) she focuses on the unalterable truth of Darcy's letter. Attention to Darcy's viewpoint is essential for the reader as well as for Elizabeth. Throughout the text, the reader has viewed Darcy's character mainly through the filter of Elizabeth's prejudice. Even Darcy's proposal, which should have indicated the beginning of Darcy's redemption, is distorted into Elizabeth's version: Austen does not record his direct speech but instead summarizes Elizabeth's perception of it. It is true that Elizabeth's vehement rejection of Darcy's speech has some basis. For, indeed, he has yet to overcome his objection to Elizabeth's social status. Nonetheless, this does not dilute the fact that we do not get to truly understand the heart of what Darcy is saying during his proposal. Similarly, Darcy's letter initially falls victim to Elizabeth's

prejudice; she reads it “with a strong prejudice against everything he might say...” (134).

Therefore, even if, as Fraiman contends, “Darcy’s letter saps [Elizabeth’s] power to comprehend, disables her attention...” (362), it is momentarily and justly done.

Elizabeth’s “power to comprehend” up to this point, especially pertaining to Darcy, has been prejudiced and grossly wrong. But with her attention, along with her prejudice, “disabled,” Elizabeth both temporarily disconnects her power to judge and takes her first steps toward permanently shedding her prejudice.

By allowing Darcy to explain himself and overtake her own views, Elizabeth sharpens her own judgment. Darcy’s logical explanation for his “despicable” past behavior becomes not the weapon that facilitates Elizabeth’s humiliation, as Fraiman believes, but the tool Elizabeth uses to test the validity of Darcy’s claim. Elizabeth’s own power of comprehension forces her to “[weigh] every circumstance with...impartiality” (135), and finally conclude that “[Darcy’s] affair with [Wickham], which she had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render Mr. Darcy’s conduct in it less than infamous, [is] capable of a turn which must leave him entirely blameless throughout the whole...” (135). In maintaining that “against the broad chest of Darcy’s logic, Elizabeth beats the ineffectual fists of her own,” (362) Fraiman ignores this process by which Elizabeth reevaluates Darcy’s conduct. In fact, Elizabeth “read[s] and re-read[s] with the closest attention” (134); she independently uses her own intellectual capacity to re-collect evidence that would contradict Darcy’s defense. Elizabeth “command[s] herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence” (135). Elizabeth has accused Darcy of treating Wickham unjustly. Now confronted with Darcy’s version of events, Elizabeth recalls Wickham’s actions and his words and, for the

first time, perceives the discrepancy between them. She reasons that Darcy would not have mentioned the near elopement of his beloved younger sister with the infamous Wickham if this near scandal were not true. Furthermore, Elizabeth understands that Darcy “would never [have] hazarded” (136) suggesting that Elizabeth apply to Colonel Fitzwilliam for verification of Wickham’s misdeeds if Darcy were not sure of Fitzwilliam’s corroboration. And having experienced the honesty and character of Colonel Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth *rationaly* accepts the truth of Darcy’s words.

Not only does Elizabeth employ logic to independently discern the truth in the affair between Darcy and Wickham, she also overcomes the emotional upheaval of facing her prejudice-driven conduct. Susan Fraiman would have it that “Darcy’s determination to inflict seems matched by Elizabeth’s to be afflicted,” and that by using Elizabeth’s ill-founded accusations as evidence, Darcy so emotionally humiliates Elizabeth for having rejected him that “they coincide in their enthusiasm for her humiliation.”⁴ Unfortunately, Fraiman chooses to back up her point with the following quotation:

“How despicably have I acted!” she cried.—“I, who have prided myself on my discernment!—I, who have valued my abilities! Who often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.—How humiliating this discovery!—Yet, how *just* a humiliation!” (137, italics mine)

Although Elizabeth’s “humiliation” is clearly painful, she does not revel in it. She neither wallows in her shame nor lashes out in anger; instead, she immediately moves on.

Fraiman ignores the power of Elizabeth’s full cry; because Elizabeth is able to admit the *justice* of Darcy’s painful revelations, she is able to deal objectively with her mistake.

And by *justly* recognizing she has done wrong, she ascends out of her “humiliation” and beyond her ego to the clear mindedness of “a judgment...unassailed by any attention to herself” (11).

In addition to understanding her own flaws, Elizabeth reflects extensively upon the painful effects of her own family’s conduct. Any pain she experiences is pain that she bravely inflicts upon *herself* because she knows that she is able to overcome such pain. Therefore, however highly Elizabeth esteems Jane’s decorum, she can now realize that Jane’s “complacency in her air and manner” (137) has indirectly resulted in the injustice she has erroneously imputed to Darcy: Bingley’s departure from Netherfield. Early in the novel, Elizabeth has ignored her friend Charlotte’s warning that Jane’s circumspect manner has driven off Bingley: “Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on” (15). Later, when Colonel Fitzwilliam informs Elizabeth that Darcy has encouraged Bingley to leave Jane and move to London, Elizabeth has assumed that Darcy snobbishly wishes to protect Bingley from Jane’s inferior position in society. On the contrary, Darcy explains to Elizabeth in his letter, his genuine concern is for Bingley’s feelings as opposed to Bingley’s status. Observing Jane’s behavior towards his friend, Darcy believes that she is not in love with Bingley. By releasing Bingley from what Darcy thinks is a match based in unreciprocated affection, Darcy honestly has his friend’s best interest in mind. It is in reviewing Jane’s past conduct, that Elizabeth now comes to the painful conclusion that Jane’s public complacency—although unintended—has indeed played an indirect part in Bingley’s departure.

Just as Elizabeth bravely recognizes Darcy's just view of Jane's behavior, she accepts Darcy's criticism of her family's indecorum. As she reads his review of her mother, father, and younger sister, Elizabeth's "sense of shame [is] severe"(137). Yet Darcy does not inflict any pain that Elizabeth has not already felt. For example, at the Netherfield ball, she is horrified when Mrs. Bennet loudly proclaims her expectation that Jane will marry Bingley, which could well impress upon Darcy a mercenary aspect to the match. Yet although Elizabeth recognizes Mrs. Bennet's faults during the ball, she does not acknowledge the danger in Mrs. Bennet's assertions. It is by not recognizing, or at least not confronting, the fact that Mrs. Bennet's vulgarity and tactlessness endangers the prospects for all of her daughters, including Elizabeth herself, that Elizabeth disables her own ability to voice her judgments about them. Darcy reveals what Elizabeth implicitly has known all along: rather than disable Elizabeth, he drives her to confront her prior pain. And although that pain is strong—for it relates to those who are closest to her—the fact that Elizabeth accepts it enables her to indiscriminately clarify her decisions.

Based on her lucid opinions of herself as well as others, Elizabeth develops an unyielding self-confidence. A defining moment comes when Lady Catherine confronts Elizabeth. Darcy's first proposal distinctly parallels Lady Catherine's confrontation with Elizabeth. Lady Catherine essentially embodies Elizabeth's previous impression of Darcy: she is that cold, rude, and demanding. Yet unlike the indirect report of Darcy's proposal, this confrontation with Lady Catherine is not presented solely through Elizabeth's consciousness. The reader as well as Elizabeth is able to hear Lady Catherine's remarks and clearly understand her implications as Lady Catherine openly challenges Elizabeth's newly won presence of mind. We now witness an extended debate

between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine. At its culmination, when Lady Catherine declares that Elizabeth will “pollute” the grounds of Pemberley (Darcy’s estate) if she accepts Darcy’s hand, Elizabeth firmly informs Lady Catherine that Darcy “is a gentleman” and that she, Elizabeth, “is a gentleman’s daughter, so far [they] are equal” (232). Elizabeth finishes not with a diatribe of accusations, as when responding to Darcy’s first proposal, but with a sharp-minded series of interchanges. Now needing no time for rumination as she has with Darcy’s letter, she reacts with a presence of mind that allows her to reply to Lady Catherine candidly and with validity, leaving Lady Catherine “shocked,” “astonished,” and “most seriously displeased” (233-234).

As admirable as Elizabeth’s self-confidence towards Lady Catherine is, Elizabeth’s ability to voice her strong objections to Mr. Bennet’s parenting skills is still more courageous. Fraiman argues that Mr. Bennet covertly controls Elizabeth’s judgments. This point is convincingly supported by Elizabeth’s inexplicable failure to express her opinions of her father until later in the text, namely after Elizabeth reads Darcy’s letter. Although the fact that “Elizabeth...had never been blind to the impropriety of her father’s behaviour as a husband” (155) could have been revealed earlier, its postponement seems designed by Austen to demonstrate that Darcy’s letter has in fact not taken away Elizabeth’s voice. It also suggests that Elizabeth fully understands Mr. Bennet’s faults only after she accepts her own, thus demonstrating Elizabeth’s continued progress towards her independence. When Mr. Bennet openly risks the reputation of his family by allowing Lydia to visit Brighton unchaperoned, Elizabeth clearly understands the danger of her father’s negligence. With a confident yet polite voice, she speaks up:

Our importance, our respectability in the world, must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia's character. Excuse me—for I must speak plainly. If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. (151)

Elizabeth's warning to Mr. Bennet thus demonstrates much more than astute advice. She implicitly declares that her opinions truly matter, that they are not trivial, that they must be taken seriously. It is true that Mr. Bennet's logic—that Lydia's insignificance will protect her from the officers at Brighton and that the Bennet family will have no peace unless Lydia is allowed to go—initially supersedes Elizabeth's logic, at least in Mr. Bennet's mind, so that he brushes aside Elizabeth's objections. Even after Lydia's elopement with Wickham proves Elizabeth right, Mr. Bennet, only briefly, acknowledges a qualified "*some* greatness of mind" in Elizabeth (194, italics mine). Yet Elizabeth has triumphed: she has found a voice wholly her own, one that is not drowned by her own feelings and fears. That is indeed an accomplishment that is far from "humiliating."

Pride and Prejudice was written when feminism had yet to be defined, and Elizabeth Bennet's actions cannot be described as a proto-feminist rebellion. It is no wonder that feminist Susan Fraiman has such intolerance for Elizabeth Bennet's decision to marry Darcy. However, although Elizabeth's tribulations and subsequent accomplishments cannot be deemed a symbol for women's liberation, her flawed character faces an even bigger battle: a fight against the weaknesses of human nature.

She, as are we, is prone to the gender-neutral weaknesses of prejudice and vanity, yet by recognizing and responding to these all-too-human failings with level-mindedness and dignity, she shows us a way out.

Notes

1. Susan Fraiman, “The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet,” excerpted in the Norton Critical 2nd edition of Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Donald Gray (New York and London: Norton, 1993), 377.
2. All references to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* are from the Norton Critical 3rd edition, ed. Donald Gray (New York and London: Norton, 2001).
3. Fraiman, 382.
4. Fraiman, 382.

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