

A Measure of Excellence: Modes of Comparison in *Pride and Prejudice*

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In *Pride and Prejudice*, as in Jane Austen's other novels, the neighbourhood at large plays a subdued but uncongenial choric role, delivering narrow and frequently censorious comments on persons and events. At the Collins wedding, these bystanders have merely "as much to say or to hear on the subject as usual".¹ The more unusual circumstances surrounding Lydia Bennet's elopement lead to more excited conjecture, after which the news that she is married after all must be borne "with decent philosophy":

To be sure it would have been more for the advantage of conversation, had Miss Lydia Bennet come upon the town; or, as the happiest alternative, been secluded from the world, in some distant farm house. But there was much to be talked of, in marrying her; and the good-natured wishes for her well-doing, which had proceeded before, from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such an husband, her misery was considered certain. (p. 309)

This particular neighbourhood, however, departs a little from Jane Austen's customary rendering in its propensity for extravagant superlatives. It takes only a few minutes for the ladies of Meryton to determine that Mr Darcy — who had figured momentarily as "much handsomer than Mr. Bingley" (p. 10) — is in fact "the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world" (p. 11). As the novel develops, the solicitations of Wickham easily persuade "the society of Hertfordshire" that Darcy is "the worst of men" (p. 138). And, no less absurdly, Wickham himself will afterwards be condemned as "the wickedest young man in the world" (p. 294).

Such extravagant superlatives as these come down to Jane Austen from the novels and plays of the late eighteenth century. Some of them had begun life, much earlier, as serious moral generalizations. The earliest pertinent example of "the best of men" cited in *OED* is: "Some . . . failures and imperfections will stick to the best of Men" (W. Payne, 1693). The "worst of men"

¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, Oxford University Press, 1923: 3rd edn 1932), p. 146. All references not otherwise assigned are to this edition.

and "the worst men in the world" come down, in equally serious and equally general contexts, from the Anglo-Saxon moralists. But, by the latter part of the eighteenth century, they had degenerated into unthinking stock phrases. In the literature of that time, every man about to marry will regard himself as "the happiest of men"; any later peccadilloes will make him "the worst of men": but, once safely dead, he can rely on being esteemed "the best of men".

In *Pride and Prejudice*, not surprisingly, Mr Collins speaks repeatedly of fixing the day — the *day* — that will make him "the happiest of men" (pp. 122, 128, 139). One may doubt that the amiable Miss Lucas will ever mean quite as much to him as does Lady Catherine de Bourgh: but Collins is not the man to question his own clichés. Lady Catherine herself professes "the greatest dislike in the world" (p. 211) for the idea of leaving young women unattended in public places. In hectoring Mrs Collins and Elizabeth Bennet on this point, she boasts of the precautions taken when her niece Georgiana stayed at Ramsgate the previous summer: she does not know — though Elizabeth does — what actually took place on that occasion. Early in the novel, before he has really become attached to Jane Bennet, Bingley also is much given to superlatives. Miss Bennet is "the most beautiful creature I ever beheld" (p. 11); he "could not conceive an angel more beautiful" (p. 16) than she; and, in general, he "had never met with pleasanter people or prettier girls in his life" (p. 16). Mrs Bennet finds an early opportunity to concur. Jane, she tells him, "has, without exception, the sweetest temper I ever met with. I often tell my other girls they are nothing to *her*" (p. 42). Lizzy, she tells Collins, is "as good natured a girl as ever lived" (p. 111). Disappointment will later carry her to another extreme: "I do not suppose there is the least chance in the world of her ever getting him now" (p. 228). The flurries of superlatives, the sheer extravagance of phrases like "in his life" and "in the world" characterize all this as akin to the "thorough novel slang"² that Jane Austen noted at one point in the manuscript her young niece had the courage to send her.

One might easily multiply such instances. In all of them, as also when Lydia Bennet speaks of some passing trifle as the

2 *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, Oxford University Press, 1932; 2nd edn 1952), p. 404.

nicest or the most shameful thing in the world, Jane Austen is turning clichés to satirical account. But she is capable, too, of giving such phrases a new life by putting them to subtler and more illuminating uses.

Mrs Reynolds, the housekeeper at Pemberley, gives a slightly fulsome but homelier and altogether more sincere turn to such phrases when she declares that the younger Darcy is "the best landlord, and the best master . . . that ever lived" and that "if I was to go through the world, I could not meet with a better" (p. 249). Georgiana Darcy's youth and inexperience make the context for her forming "the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth" (p. 387): Elizabeth, after all, dares to make fun of the brother whom she herself could only hold in awe. Wickham has good cause to speak of the elder Darcy as "one of the best men that ever breathed, and the truest friend I ever had" (p. 78): if the first phrase verges on the rhapsodic, the second is a simple truth. And Mr Bennet is very largely justified in regarding Kitty and Lydia as "two of the silliest girls in the country" (p. 29) and Wickham as "one of the most worthless young men in Great Britain" (p. 308). His "in the country" marks a rational limitation of the superlative especially if, as is usual with Jane Austen's writings, we are to take "country" as meaning "county" or even "neighbourhood". In the other instance, there is a suitable hint of pedantry in his allowing himself to exceed his experience with "in Great Britain" while denying himself the not dissimilar excess of "in the world". The implicit allusion (if it is one) to the then very recent incorporation of Ireland into the United Kingdom³ indicates that the man who has shut himself away from most of his family has not closed his mind to the world beyond it.

Notwithstanding those defects that make up his alleged pride of rank, Darcy is possessed from the first of the exactness of speech and the discrimination of judgment that are among the chief marks of personal maturity in all Jane Austen's novels. He rarely draws on superlatives to help him say what he means. And, when he does, they do not obscure or exaggerate his mean-

3 In his Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* (p. xiii), Dr Chapman confesses himself uncertain whether the manuscript that Jane Austen revised in 1812 was the original *First Impressions*, written in 1796-7, or a later version. If Mr Bennet's phrase "in Great Britain" gains a particular edge through alluding to the incorporation of Ireland, that phrase would not have been written until after 1800—but would hardly have seemed topical in 1812.

ing. Not for him the stock phrases of a Collins or the rhapsodies of a Bingley. Enough to say, even of Elizabeth, "it is many months since I have considered her as one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance" (p. 271). On his lips, even "the best of men" is restored to meaning by being used with the seriousness and the true generality that it originally possessed: "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" (p. 57). And, if such comments sometimes fall a little heavily into the conversations that occasion them, that is only to say that Darcy has something to learn from Elizabeth.

She, of course, has something to learn from him. In several especially difficult situations, her strength of feeling leads her into superlatives more extreme than good sense supports. This tendency is offset by a courteous inversion of ideas when she tells the importunate Collins, "You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so" (p. 107). Darcy, she feels, had "ruined for a while every hope of happiness for the most affectionate, generous heart in the world" (p. 186) and she tells him outright that he is "the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry" (p. 193). And, much later, caught off balance by meeting him so unexpectedly in the grounds of Pemberley, she feels that "her coming there was the most unfortunate, the most ill-judged thing in the world" (p. 252).

In more ordinary circumstances, Jane Austen maintains a degree of restraint over Elizabeth's superlatives by quietly reminding us that the girl's experience of life is limited indeed. For one who has grown up near Meryton, Wickham may well qualify as "beyond all comparison, the most agreeable man I ever saw" (p. 144). Protected as she has been from the extremities of suffering, she may well feel that Darcy has brought "misery of the acutest kind" (p. 191) to Jane and even Bingley. Her reflections on Darcy's letter are fit to leave her "depressed beyond any thing she had ever known before" (p. 209). She is right to think, at Pemberley, that "she had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste" (p. 245). And, striving vainly to arouse her father's concern about Lydia, she can be pardoned for declaring that, uncorrected, her sister will soon become "the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous" (p. 231).

There are, however, two occasions on which Elizabeth and the more carefully-spoken Jane coincide in their recourse to well-worn superlatives. On telling Elizabeth that she is to marry Bingley, Jane acknowledges herself "the happiest creature in the world" (p. 346), "the most fortunate creature that ever existed" (p. 350). In making a like announcement, Elizabeth tells Jane that she and Darcy have "settled between us already, that we are to be the happiest couple in the world" (p. 373) and later writes to tell Mrs Gardiner, "I am the happiest creature in the world" (p. 382-3). In each of these instances, however, Jane Austen finds entirely characteristic and effective ways of distinguishing the two sisters from the cliché-mongers. Jane's gentle delight in her good fortune — the larger implications of "creature" should not be overlooked — leads her immediately to question her own deserts and to wish Elizabeth an equal joy. And, in a manner reminiscent of her *Letters*, Jane Austen has Elizabeth smiling at each of her own clichés in the very moment of its inception: "Perhaps I did not always love him so well as I do now. But in such cases as these, a good memory is unpardonable. This is the last time I shall ever remember it myself" (p. 373).

From the evidence considered so far, it emerges, not unexpectedly, that even these small forms of expression allow Jane Austen to display the idiosyncrasies of her characters. The extravagant and the hackneyed qualities of many of these superlatives enable her fools to exhibit their various follies. In their more sparing and sensitive uses of essentially similar phrases, her more admirable characters are able to show, in a variety of ways, their intellectual restraint and nicety of judgment; their sense of what is appropriate to a particular occasion; and in Elizabeth (as in Emma Woodhouse), the characteristically Austenian wit that so often turns a loose expression back on itself and sports exuberantly with the implications of dead metaphors and stock phrases. Beyond all this again, in areas scarcely touched on in the little preamble that has occupied us so far, the comparisons a person offers (or does not offer) can reveal much about his experience of life and the attitudes he takes to it.

But what forms of comparison are available to the person who — like most of the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* — is given to thinking on those lines? At its simplest, comparison amounts to an assertion that "A is more (or less) y than B": this room is larger than that; their father is wealthier than yours. In

thinking minds, superlatives like those already considered amount to an extension of the simple comparison: A, indeed, is the surpassing instance of y. If Mary Bennet is "the most accomplished girl in the neighbourhood" (p. 12), the neighbourhood would seem to have a misguided, though not uncommon, idea of accomplishment: but, be that as it may, a comparison — with the unfortunate Longs and Lucases, no doubt — is certainly intended. In minds like that of Collins, however, superlatives are merely vacuous intensives scarcely implying a comparison at all. His notion of becoming "the happiest of men", for example, amounts to a belief that Lady Catherine thinks it fitting for him to marry promptly, preferably with a gentlewoman, and that Charlotte Lucas is more compliant than the elder Bennet sisters.

The comparative mode of thinking is often less overt. A common form is the assertion that "A is y" where y is an epithet whose real force is comparative: thus, when the Bingleys think of getting medical attention for Jane Bennet, "no *country* advice could be of any service" (p. 40: my italics). As Johnson recognized, in the Preface to *Shakespeare*, when he distinguished between absolute and comparative excellence, few epithets in the language are quite free of a comparative implication of this kind; and accordingly I shall confine myself, in later discussion, to a few leading instances. With her major characters especially, Jane Austen often makes searching use of yet another form, in which no overt comparison need be offered but in which a person's judgment is much influenced by an implicit or even an unrecognized ideal. More of Emma Woodhouse's behaviour than she would care, at first, to think rests on comparisons of the Philip Eltons and Frank Churchills with her idea of what a man should be — an idea formed on Mr Knightley. "You cannot have been always at Longbourn" (p. 179), says Darcy to Elizabeth, implying a firm contrast between the locality and the larger world, a preference for the latter, and a high estimation of Elizabeth herself. A sardonic example of this important form of concealed comparison occurs when Lady Catherine, as high-handed as she is obtuse, sallies forth to bring her villagers into conformity with her idea of what villagers should be, seeking above all to "scold them into harmony and plenty" (p. 169). But, if purposes of clarity are served by distinguishing these various forms of comparison from one another, some minds find no difficulty in running them together — as when Lydia focuses all her thin intensity on an increasingly reluctant object:

He was her dear Wickham on every occasion; no one was to be put in competition with him. He did every thing best in the world; and she was sure he would kill more birds on the first of September, than any body else in the country. (p. 318)

The narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* offers more comparisons than any of the characters except Elizabeth. Sometimes they amount essentially to moral comparisons or contrasts between one character and another as in the famous set-piece at the end of the first chapter: "Her mind was less difficult to develope" (p. 5). Sometimes they reflect the judgment of a character into whose consciousness the novelist chooses not to enter more completely, as when we are told that Bingley finds Jane "as handsome as she had been last year; as good natured, and as unaffected, though not quite so chatty" (p. 337); or as when, passing a whole morning with Bingley, Mr Bennet proves "more communicative, and less eccentric than the other had ever seen him" (p. 346). But the narrator's comparisons are governed, above all, by structural considerations and tend, as they accumulate, to produce a kind of symmetry that distinguishes *Pride and Prejudice* from Jane Austen's later novels. The opening comparison between husband and wife is swiftly followed by comparisons between Elizabeth and Jane; Darcy and Bingley; Lady Lucas and Mrs Bennet; the younger sisters and the older ones — and so on throughout the novel. One's growing impression that the young novelist has hit upon too ready a means of marshalling her ideas and too convenient a method of transition is confirmed when whole episodes are linked in this way: there is an explicit example in the contrast drawn between the gloomy period following Lydia's departure for Brighton and the postponement of Elizabeth's expedition with the Gardiners and, on the other hand, the happier phase to which this gradually gives place; and there are abundant instances of that form of dramatic irony in which a prophecy is neatly reversed in the manner of its fulfilment. All this makes, no doubt, for conciseness and a certain stylishness. But one gradually begins to form unfavourable comparisons oneself: with the wonderful fluidity of *Persuasion*; with the majestic ordonnance of *Tom Jones*; with the unfathomable depths of contrast in *Rasselas*; with the delicately evoked relationships of *Lord Jim*, where each of the lesser characters discovers his own point of resemblance to the man who remains always "one of us". The nice symmetries of *Pride and Prejudice* begin to look like tidiness — and then one recalls that the gist of the matter has been better put elsewhere:

Exactness of symmetry such as this [patterning of the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy] carries with it one danger. The novelist's subtlety of apprehension may be numbed by this other faculty of his for imposing order on what he apprehends. His apprehension of human relationships, for example, may fail to develop or, if it develops, fail to find due expression because he is impelled to simplify these relationships in his story in the interests of its pattern. To a contemporary it might perhaps seem, when *Pride and Prejudice* appeared, that such a misfortune was about to overtake Jane Austen. *Mansfield Park* shows that it did not.⁴

Besides the limitation that it offers, the reference here to *Mansfield Park* — like my own reference to *Persuasion* — admits an important qualification: to say that a youthful work like *Pride and Prejudice* falls short of those novels is not to deny it a measure of excellence. Something of that, as seen from a particular angle of incidence, appears in the intellectually and emotionally revealing uses to which Jane Austen's characters put the forms of comparison I have described.

Collins's peculiar "mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility" (p. 70) colours all his laboured compliments to Lady Catherine both in her own right and as mother to one who — had she been quite other than she is — might undoubtedly have made the "brightest ornament" of the British court and adorned "the most elevated rank" (p. 67). It colours, equally, his cruelly tactless letter of condolence to Mr Bennet with its reminders that his distress at Lydia's elopement "must be of the bitterest kind, because proceeding from a cause which no time can remove" and originating in "a circumstance that must be of all others most afflicting to a parent's mind. The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this" (pp. 296-7). In his uncertainty whether God or patron, if they must be distinguished, should take precedence in any proper scheme of clerical values; in his astonished gratification that Lady Catherine should speak to him "as she would to any other gentleman" (p. 66); in his assurance to Elizabeth that Lady Catherine will expect her to wear no better clothes than her best, the habit of comparison pervades his (so to say) thinking and the mistress of Rosings supplies his one fixed point of reference: "of all the views which his garden, or which the country, or the kingdom could boast, none were to be compared with the prospect of Rosings" (p. 156). This utter fixity, combined with an

4 Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford 1939), pp. 163-4.

instinct for name-dropping, leads him into yet greater absurdities when he can find no other compliment to Mrs Philips than that, for elegance, she ranks next after Lady Catherine and her daughter among all the women he has ever seen; and so, again, when he can marshal no other response to the Philips's drawing-room than "a comparison that did not at first convey much gratification" (p. 75) with the small summer breakfast parlour at Rosings. Almost from his first appearance, Collins is a sad embarrassment to Elizabeth: whereas she associates him with Rosings, she soon finds that Darcy regards him as a connection of the Bennets.

Darcy cannot so easily disclaim Miss Bingley. During the period of hostilities, that is of some comfort to Elizabeth: for, both in fixity of mind and in a capacity for low flattery, Miss Bingley is Collins's peer. During the long evenings at Netherfield, Miss Bingley — who would have it that she "sooner . . . tires of any thing than of a book" (p. 55) — actually finds little other occupation than to compare Darcy's speed and evenness of writing with that of lesser men, Georgiana's design for a table with that of Miss Grantley, her own father's small collection of books with the "delightful library you have at Pemberley" (p. 38), Charles's putative house with Pemberley itself. If her preoccupation with Pemberley matches Collins's preoccupation with Rosings, she differs from him in having everything yet to gain. She differs from him also in her aggressiveness, which extends to the use of her temple itself as a basis for savage witticisms: "Do let the portraits of your uncle and aunt Philips be placed in the gallery at Pemberley. Put them next to your great uncle the judge. They are in the same profession, you know; only in different lines" (pp. 52-3).

Her idealization of Pemberley as the epitome of the proper thing goes some way beyond her designs on Darcy and her growing jealousy of Elizabeth. The personal animus is at work in her comment on Elizabeth's "most country town indifference to decorum" (p. 36). But, all animus aside, she occasionally gives glimpses of a more general, though no more admirable, scheme of values in which Pemberley and the great world are associated in a manner beyond the cognizance of Meryton. This poses difficulties for Darcy and Elizabeth. He finds it easier to set aside her flattery of himself and her jealousy of Elizabeth than to distinguish what is genuinely worthwhile in his beloved Pemberley from Miss Bingley's ill-bred distortion of its values and

her misuse of it in invidious comparisons with other ways of life. Elizabeth, not unnaturally, regards Darcy's view of things as more nearly like Miss Bingley's than it ever was; and she is slow to make the necessary distinctions.

Their tasks are made the easier, however, by Miss Bingley's essential stupidity. Her pretensions to rationality and cultivation of mind are amusingly exposed, for example, by her preference for a "much more rational" kind of ball at which "conversation instead of dancing [would be] made the order of the day" (p. 55). Her brother smilingly answers that, while such an arrangement might be more rational, "it would not be near so much like a ball" (p. 56). It is left to us to take the further point implicit in her abuse of the stock phrase, "order of the day". Her stupidity also manifests itself in the nagging repetitions of her jibes about country manners and about Elizabeth's "fine eyes". Her last attempt (p. 269) to denigrate Elizabeth by associating her and her family with Wickham and the militia is damaging only to herself: for Georgiana Darcy has no wish to be reminded of Wickham; and Darcy is not stirred to contempt of the Bennets' low associations but rather to jealousy of Elizabeth's possible interest in the same young gentleman. Lady Catherine, however, is even more serviceable than Miss Bingley in teaching Elizabeth that the Pemberley circle are not all alike and, equally, in teaching Darcy to distinguish the true worth of Pemberley from the accretions of a narrow materialism and a sterile pride of rank.

As Lady Catherine reduces rooms and furniture, gardens and musical instruments, personal qualities and family relationships to materialistic considerations and monetary comparisons, she embodies the worst associations of her own surname. But it is more appropriate to regard her as an individual or, at most, as a recognizable social type than as the chosen representative of a whole social class. The need to preserve such a distinction rests partly on historical grounds. The gradual absorption of the old gentry into an emerging middle class in a union of landed and monied interests was not far advanced in Jane Austen's day: Forster's Wilcoxes were of a generation yet unborn. It rests also on the literary ground that, though she is keenly interested in the phenomena of social change, Jane Austen does not often portray "representative figures".⁵ Lady Catherine, the daughter

5 I attempted to develop this line of argument more fully in "*Persuasion* and its Sets of People", *Sydney Studies in English* II (1976-7), 1-23.

of an earl, has more in common with Mrs Elton than with her nephews, Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. And, though she certainly uses her social position as a means of self-assertion, her concern is for herself and not for anything so abstract as "class loyalty". This line of argument holds good, I think, even on ostensibly social questions: through the self-congratulatory quality, so crass in that particular company, of her assertion that there is "no occasion for entailing estates from the female line" (p. 164); and, again, through the personal spleen that chiefly motivates her defence of "the shades of Pemberley" (p. 357) against Elizabeth's rumoured usurpation of Miss de Bourgh's allegedly superior claim to Darcy's hand. Self-gratification is undeniably the point of her unremitting assertions of a right to adjudicate on such matters as Mrs Collins's excessively large joints of meat and the failure of the Bennet parents, unlike the less affluent Webbs, to ensure that their daughters all learnt to play and sing; of her conviction that "nobody feels the loss of friends so much as I do" (p. 210); and of those delusions of self-reference that persuade her that she must be the reason for Darcy's increased reluctance to end his visit or, again, that "daughters are never of so much consequence to a father" (p. 211) as to a mother. No motive but a grotesque vein of self-glorification can account, finally, for her intruding, with a flurry of vain comparisons, into a quiet conversation about music:

"I must have my share in the conversation, if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England, I suppose, who have more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply." (p. 173)

By the time she has finished with this subject, Darcy is looking "a little ashamed of his aunt's ill breeding" (p. 173). Elizabeth can comfort herself that, in his family, Lady Catherine's contribution is not so very different from her own mother's contribution to her family. Neither Elizabeth nor Darcy, of course, is fully aware, at this stage, of the extent to which the other differs from these older relatives of theirs.

If Mrs Bennet is more nakedly competitive than Lady Catherine, she has more than self-glorification at stake. The actual (or fancied) necessity of defending domestic or local pieties can drive her, it is true, on to other subjects than the only one that really matters to her. She is easily pricked into comparisons of her housekeeping with that of her neighbours. She yields, as she

must, to Lady Catherine's implied comparison between the grounds of Longbourn-house and the park at Rosings — but makes the best of it by introducing a further comparison with Sir William Lucas's grounds. And she enters, with more energy than sense, into the conversation about the relative merits of London and the country, surprising everybody with her claim that (whatever "*that*" may be) "there is quite as much of *that* going on in the country as in town" (p. 43). But the marrying of her daughters is her vocation. With that in mind, she is always quick to compare them with the daughters of her neighbours, to the unfailing advantage of her own; and she is equally willing, even in their presence, to compare her daughters with each other, to the unfailing advantage of whichever of them is currently making the best running in the matrimonial stakes. All this makes for bitterness at times, as in the dark hour when she acknowledges "that Lady Lucas will have a daughter married before I have, and that Longbourn estate is just as much entailed as ever. The Lucases are very artful people indeed, sister. They are all for what they can get" (p. 140). But it reaches a happier resolution, in a crescendo of comparisons, as she salutes the successive triumphs of Lydia, Jane, and, above all, "the least dear to her of all her children" (p. 103):

"Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane's is nothing to it — nothing at all." (p. 378)

Her husband's understanding of himself and of the woman he chose to marry is made clear at a moment when his sardonic composure quite deserts him. Believing that his cherished Elizabeth is wanting to marry a person she cannot really esteem, so repeating his own folly and misfortune, he treats her as her mother's daughter in a bitter little parody: "He is rich, to be sure, and you may have more fine clothes and fine carriages than Jane. But will they make you happy?" (p. 376). And then, given pause by Elizabeth's distressed sincerities, he coins only one more epigram before offering deeply felt advice, his only unguarded speech in all the novel, and one of Jane Austen's plainest utterances on the subject.

This small episode shows, contrary to some accounts of him, that Mr Bennet is nothing so simple as a heartless cynic. Generally, however, his behaviour suggests that he has worn the garb of the witty recluse too long to go comfortably without it: "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and

to laugh at them in our turn?" (p. 364). In this mode, he fashions his wife's comparisons among their daughters into less conventional shapes: "they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters" (p. 5); and he is especially gratified "to discover that Charlotte Lucas, whom he had been used to think tolerably sensible, was as foolish as his wife, and more foolish than his daughter!" (p. 127). The young men who come to Longbourn-house also become the targets of comparison. Wickham is "as fine a fellow . . . as ever I saw. . . I defy even Sir William Lucas himself, to produce a more valuable son-in-law" (p. 330). On another occasion, he gives Collins "the preference even over Wickham, much as I value the impudence and hypocrisy of my son-in-law" (p. 364). Bingley is treated with a gentler mockery, as a suitable husband for Jane: "You are each of you so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on; so easy, that every servant will cheat you; and so generous, that you will always exceed your income" (p. 348). And his eventual acceptance of Darcy is signalled by a final ranking of candidates: "Wickham, perhaps, is my favourite; but I think I shall like *your* husband quite as well as Jane's" (p. 379).

Apart from her climactic ventures into the superlative, considered earlier, Jane Bennet is conspicuous for her avoidance of comparison in all its forms. The handful of examples allowed her, moreover, are uniformly generous: "Our poor mother is sadly grieved. My father bears it better" (p. 274); "my uncle's advice and assistance would be everything in the world" (p. 276); "Wickham is not so undeserving, then, as we have thought him" (p. 303). Even when she herself is the sufferer, her manner does not change: Bingley "may live in my memory as the most amiable man of my acquaintance" (p. 134); "Oh! that my dear mother had more command over herself; she can have no idea of the pain she gives me by her continual reflections on him" (p. 134). As is made evident by the narrator (p. 138), there is no accident in Jane's departing so completely from the customary modes of this novel of comparisons. Her remarkable candour (in its old sense of generosity of mind rather than frankness of speech) leads her always to "make allowance . . . for difference of situation and temper" (p. 135) and, in such differences, to find the uniqueness of human individuals and an extenuation of their follies and errors. With Jane Bennet, then, as a solitary reminder of attitudes that Jane Austen considered possible, it is time to

take stock of the predominantly invidious comparisons that have occupied us so far.

Miss Lascelles' comment, quoted earlier, on the danger of numbing the apprehensions by too determined a pursuit of order bears heavily on many of these characters. A cry of "My daughters first and last!" shows a poor appreciation of other people's sons. A cry of "*Pemberley contra mundum!*" — the harsh exclusiveness of *Brideshead* would be congenial to Miss Bingley — makes for a numbed apprehension of both *Pemberley* and the world. And even Mr Bennet's epigrams can cost him more understanding than they yield, as in the crucial instance where his bitter comparison between Elizabeth and his wife momentarily stultifies his awareness that Elizabeth is not like his wife at all and that the explanation for her puzzling behaviour must lie elsewhere.

In their tendency to judge objects — and even people — chiefly in terms of size, cost and display, Mrs Bennet and Lady Catherine, with Collins as a willing imitator, supply evidence for any reasonable hypothesis about an emerging materialism. Even the detestable Darcy is immediately transfigured, if that is the word, for Mrs Bennet when he lays his ten thousand pounds a year at her daughter's feet. At Lady Catherine's dinner-party, we might almost be at home with the *Veneerings*: "The dinner was exceedingly handsome, and there were all the servants, and all the articles of plate which Mr. Collins had promised" (p. 162). There is no sign among these people that an object may be valued for its beauty, for its fulfilment of an intrinsic purpose, or for the personal associations it may carry. That kind of thinking appears, by contrast, in Darcy's willingness, on the one hand, to anticipate his sister's wishes in re-decorating a sitting-room and, on the other hand, to leave his father's favourite room just as it was, with even the miniature of Wickham still in its place.

Although contrasts of social position are often in evidence, they are not so much fixed quantities as one set of weapons, among others, in the tribal conflicts and rites of passage that Jane Austen understands so well. Within the ranks of the gentry, there is room enough for conflicts between London and the country, Derbyshire and Hertfordshire, Longbourn-house and Lucas Lodge. One is reminded of the gulf between the bride's side and the groom's at wedding-ceremonies and of those uneasy conversations at wedding-breakfasts where people very like each other are almost in need of phrase-books.

In another, more constant aspect, the essence of these conflicts lies in competition between individuals in more or less covert efforts to gain dominance in personal relationships or to salvage as much as possible from a losing day. Where this is most obvious — with Lady Catherine, Miss Bingley, and Mrs Bennet — it is easy to remember that the apotheosis of competition, in *The Origin of Species*, was not far beyond the horizon in Jane Austen's day. Though less obvious, moreover, competition is no less influential in Collins's parasitic attachment of himself to a mightier power; in Lydia's determination to be married, at any cost, before any of her sisters; and in Mr Bennet's recourse to the power of wit as a surrogate for victory in the more overt struggle from which he has ostensibly withdrawn. The self-concern to which all this reduces is nowhere more naked than in Mrs Collins's typically prudential comparison between Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam as possible husbands for Elizabeth. The colonel, she acknowledges

was beyond comparison the pleasantest man; he certainly admired her, and his situation in life was most eligible; but, to counter-balance these advantages, Mr. Darcy had considerable patronage in the church, and his cousin could have none at all.⁶ (p. 181)

The overt social emphasis of Jane Austen's novels has attracted more attention, among her critics, than the epistemological emphasis that often makes its basis. From an epistemological point of view, most of the comparisons considered so far are expressions of something akin to Coleridge's "fancy". They are, that is to say, a business of "fixities and definites" in which the unfamiliar (or even "other") is compared with the familiar, found wanting, and rejected. Jane Bennet's refusal to think in this constricting way and her patient but sometimes over-generous efforts to make allowance for her fellows mark her off from the other characters discussed so far. But she also stands apart from those not yet discussed. Compared especially with Elizabeth at her best, Jane is lacking in intellectual adventurousness, in the power of "imagination" to reach, through comparison, from the familiar to the unfamiliar — and find it good.

The more positive use of comparison appears, in a straightforward form, in Mr and Mrs Gardiner. Their only invidious

6 Henrietta Musgrove and Charles Hayter make a similar calculation of advantage in *Persuasion* when they reckon the probable life-expectancy of the incumbent of a desirable church-living. Unlike Charlotte, however, they are only anticipating the inevitable.

comparisons are occasional mild jokes at Elizabeth's expense: "I thought him [Darcy] very sly; — he hardly ever mentioned your name. But slyness seems the fashion" (p. 325). Both husband and wife occasionally distinguish between realities and expectations in a commonsense way: on first meeting the much-maligned Darcy, for example, they find him "infinitely superior to any thing they had expected" (p. 257). But their most interesting use of comparison informs their reasonings on the probabilities of Lydia's elopement: "Well, then — supposing them to be in London. They may be there, though for the purpose of concealment, for no more exceptionable purpose. It is not likely that money should be very abundant on either side; and it might strike them that they could be more economically, though less expeditiously, married in London, than in Scotland" (pp. 282-3). The Gardiners, of course, are being kind to Elizabeth and too charitable to Lydia and Wickham. They are nevertheless putting comparison to a different use from any we have seen.

Many of Darcy's comparisons take the implicit form that marks intelligent restraint, as when he begins to find that Elizabeth's face is "rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes" (p. 23). So subdued a form of praise as "uncommonly" or "remarkably" gives no satisfaction to Mrs Bennet who, well knowing that her dinner is as well-dressed as anyone ever saw and fifty times better than the Lucases', regards his compliments as grudging. When Darcy goes further than this, it is often in the direction of a rational weighing of alternatives: in his judgment, for example, that his alleged betrayal of obligations to Wickham is a far graver matter than his admitted intervention between Bingley and Jane or, again, in his comparisons between Bingley's situation and his own. As with his grave comment on "the wisest and the best of men", considered much earlier, he sometimes transforms comparisons into Johnsonian apothegms ("Nothing is more deceitful . . . than the appearance of humility": p. 48) and Johnsonian analogies like the connection he finds between the dancing of polished societies and that of savages. And when Elizabeth presents him with a similar analogy about pianists, directed at himself, he accepts her criticism and neatly extends the analogy into a compliment to her (pp. 175-6).

Nowhere in the novel does he seek a specious advantage or allow himself a truly invidious comparison. In the debate between London and the country, his contribution is an entirely rational

generalization. Mrs Bennet is at fault for misunderstanding him on this occasion. On other occasions when he is misunderstood, however, the fault lies in his failure to allow for his own moral and intellectual weight (about which Bingley teases him delightfully) or, more seriously, to allow for the prepossessions of his hearers. Even on the central question of "pride", he soon begins to make essential distinctions. Although Elizabeth's "manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness" (p. 23). Although her connections are certainly his social inferiors, "connection" is not everything. Although he has to consider his station more seriously than Bingley does, he struggles to resolve the conflict between his increasing attachment and what he believes the world expects of him. If his pride consists at first in a painful diffidence in unfamiliar company, issuing for example in his first rash comment about Elizabeth, it is transformed, on the occasion of his first proposal of marriage, into something rather different. There is a complacent assumption, inculcated by his whole upbringing (see p. 369), that a person of her standing — not Elizabeth, but a person of her standing — cannot possibly reject a person of his. And there is an honest *gaucherie* that allows him to debate these issues to her face: "In vain have I struggled. It will not do" (p. 189). These are not admirable qualities. But, even in anger, Darcy is entirely free of the much less admirable qualities of his associates; and, in the long and fruitful consideration he gives to Elizabeth's "Had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner" (p. 192: cf. p. 367), he shows a genuine magnanimity.

When Elizabeth comes to recognize that, if Darcy were to propose marriage a second time, she would gladly accept, she ruefully considers what a triumph that knowledge would give him: "He was as generous, she doubted not, as the most generous of his sex. But while he was mortal, there must be a triumph" (pp. 311-12). As she is later to discover, he is among those mortals who need no such triumphs. It is she, on this occasion, who is led astray by worldly opinion and by the self-glorifying appetencies of almost everyone she has ever known.

Early in the novel, Elizabeth's idiom is much coloured by that of her family in its exaggerations, its colloquialisms, and its casually dismissive judgments:

"What could be more natural than his asking you again? He could not help seeing that you were about five times as pretty as every other woman in the room. No thanks to his gallantry for that.

Well, he certainly is very agreeable, and I give you leave to like him. You have liked many a stupider person . . . And so, you like this man's sisters too, do you? Their manners are not equal to his." (pp. 14-15)

These habits of speech and mind never quite desert her: the refreshing vulgarity of her comment on Lady Catherine and the pigs (p. 158) shows them in one aspect; a gratuitous jibe about the defeated Miss Bingley (p. 382) shows them in another. But Elizabeth soon distinguishes herself from those around her by a more polished and unexpected turn of phrase and also by an idiosyncratic line of comparison.

Almost from the beginning of hostilities between the local people and the newcomers, with only Jane and Bingley as intermediaries, Elizabeth is less disposed to offer the aggressive comparisons that those about her employ than to make comparisons that betray a fear of being compared: "I would really rather not sit down before those who must be in the habit of hearing the very best performers" (p. 24). This might seem a natural enough expression of modesty or uncertainty — except in *Pride and Prejudice*. It lies behind the rather feverish wit that she affects at Netherfield. And it is to persist until she gains self-assurance. When she notices Darcy looking at her intently, she assumes that there must be "a something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his ideas of right, than in any other person present. The supposition [she stoutly but unconvincingly insists] did not pain her" (p. 51). She has better cause, after her family's performance at the Netherfield ball, for trying to "determine whether the silent contempt of the gentleman, or the insolent smiles of the ladies, were more intolerable" (p. 102). And she later finds herself comparing herself with Georgiana, as Darcy might regard them: "I will not be alarmed though your sister *does* play so well" (p. 174). This kind of self-doubt, it should be added, has its favourable side: in her ability to consider how she must look in other people's eyes, Elizabeth shows more capacity for imaginative growth than those whose self-assurance blinds them.

A series of comparative judgments of Wickham indicates how limited Elizabeth's experience has been and, once again, how rich is her capacity for growth. At first, reasonably enough, she finds Wickham as far beyond the other officers "in person, countenance, air, and walk, as *they* were superior to the broad-faced stuffy uncle Philips, breathing port wine, who followed

them into the room" (p. 76). A little later, he seems "beyond all comparison, the most agreeable man I ever saw" (p. 144); and, in a rash moment, she concludes that "whether married or single, he must always be her model of the amiable and pleasing" (p. 152). These superficial charms of person and countenance, of the agreeable and the amiable, are just those of the Willoughbys and Frank Churchills; and they make no lasting impression on Jane Austen's heroines. But while Elizabeth (not knowing that she is an Austen heroine) admits, in a series of witty comparisons between herself and the heroines of romance, that she does not really love Wickham, she does not seriously reconsider her opinion of him until her experience is enlarged. When she has the opportunity to compare him with Colonel Fitzwilliam, she soon concludes that "though . . . there was less captivating softness in Colonel Fitzwilliam's manners, she believed he might have the best informed mind" (p. 180). The contrast is amusingly understated: but its effect persists.

Her continuing growth is evidenced in a variety of comparisons as her travels begin. In a pleasant union of enthusiasm and wit, she answers Mrs Gardiner's invitation by telling her how unlike other travellers they will be. During the intervening visit to Hunsford, she takes up a comparison of rooms at the Parsonage and, unlike her elders in similar cases, arrives at a cogent reason why Mrs Collins should have chosen an inferior room for her own. She confronts Darcy, as we have seen, with a pertinent analogy and is surprised by his equally pertinent extension of it. Both in her appraisal of Colonel Fitzwilliam and in her rejection of Darcy's proposal of marriage, she draws on a general criterion of what is gentlemanly, a better-founded criterion altogether than the version she had previously employed on Wickham. In the bitter reflections occasioned by Darcy's letter, she repeatedly compares Darcy with Wickham, one version of events with the other, Darcy's interpretation of Jane's behaviour with her own, his reflections on the Netherfield ball with her own shamefaced recollections of it: and, on all these and other points, her honesty and intelligence gradually overcome her resentment, leaving her eventually in a state of increased understanding and considerable chagrin.

Much has been made, since Sir Walter Scott first canvassed it, of the idea that Elizabeth Bennet marries for wealth and station. As when Anne Elliot is tempted by the possibility of becoming Lady Elliot of Kellynch, Elizabeth gives the like possibility a

moment's thought and, unlike Anne, afterwards jokes about it at her own expense: Jane Austen is too honest a novelist to conceal the charms of mercenariness. Like Anne, again, Elizabeth quickly discards the idea, supposing that it would come into conflict with deeper personal attachments: " 'But no', — recollecting herself, — 'that could never be: my uncle and aunt would have been lost to me: I should not have been allowed to invite them' " (p. 246).

Meanwhile, paradoxically, Elizabeth is showing us, through mostly tacit but entirely apposite comparisons between Pemberley and the other houses she has known, that she is becoming worthy to become its mistress: one might argue, indeed, that as she ceases to entertain all such comparisons and begins to appreciate the great house for itself, she is showing her own moral and imaginative quality in a way that Pope and Cowper would have understood:

Elizabeth . . . went to a window to enjoy its prospect. The hill, crowned with wood, from which they had descended, receiving increased abruptness from the distance, was a beautiful object. Every disposition of the ground was good; and she looked on the whole scene, the river, the trees scattered on its banks, and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it, with delight. (p. 246)

They entered the woods, and bidding adieu to the river for a while, ascended some of the higher grounds; whence, in spots where the opening of the trees gave the eye power to wander, were many charming views of the valley, the opposite hills, with the long range of woods overspreading many, and occasionally part of the stream. (p. 253)

On reaching the house, they were shewn through the hall into the saloon, whose northern aspect rendered it delightful for summer. Its windows opening to the ground, admitted a most refreshing view of the high woody hills behind the house, and of the beautiful oaks and Spanish chesnuts which were scattered over the intermediate lawn. (p. 267)⁷

Apart from these delicately evoked responses and apart, too, from a series of anxious, then relieved comparisons between the Georgiana she meets and the Georgiana she had expected, Elizabeth spends a great part of her time in Derbyshire comparing the new Darcy with the old. This line of thinking occupies her for a dozen pages of the novel, after which she accepts the change more confidently and enters upon a more direct analysis of his behaviour and her own feelings (p. 265). Although she is not

7 In all three passages, the dominant epithets are of the kind that, while resting inevitably on comparative standards of judgment, point towards a doctrine of intrinsic value.

yet satisfied that she knows why he has changed, the change in Elizabeth herself is summed up, soon after the arrival of Jane's letters about Lydia: "never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain" (p. 278).

In the sequel, it does not occur to Elizabeth that Darcy feels a moral responsibility for Wickham and — on a difficult question — just such a remorse as her own for not having made Wickham's former conduct public. It certainly does not occur to her, in the weeks that follow, that, far from resuming his old opinion of her family, Darcy is busy making reparations for his supposed error of judgment and trying to ensure that his good offices remain unknown to her. Such time as she has for reflection, in those weeks, goes rather to a weighing of the current situation against the recent one and to a sad acceptance that she has lost him. At times this acceptance takes the form of poignant comparisons between the pleasure it would give her to be able to seek his aid and the mortification of his knowing as much as he does, between her former rejection of his proposals and her present willingness to accept him.

Upon his return to Netherfield and to Longbourn-house, she is driven once more into puzzled comparisons between the man she had known at Pemberley and the man who seems, once more, to have reverted to his original self. She reasons about the probabilities, in the manner of the Gardiners, speculating on his continuing to treat the Gardiners but not herself as he had at Pemberley; on the possible influence — "a painful, but not an improbable, conjecture" (p. 335) — of her mother as opposed to her uncle and aunt; on the likely influence on him of Lady Catherine. Darcy, meanwhile, is silently studying her silences. Even now their inward diffidence and self-doubt is the chief barrier between them. Almost as much out of impatience as affection, Elizabeth eventually takes a necessary initiative and gives him an opportunity to renew his proposals. When all is resolved, they enter into a competitive struggle, reminiscent of so many others in *Pride and Prejudice*. But each of them is competing for a greater share of the blame for their past misunderstandings.

Towards the end of their time at Longbourn with her family, Elizabeth draws a last invidious comparison, looking forward "with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance

of their family party at Pemberley" (p. 384). Pardonable as they are at such a time and in such a situation, these feelings gradually give way to decorum and magnanimity. If we infer — as I think we must — that Mrs Bennet sometimes accompanies her husband and daughters on visits to Pemberley, no one who has any serious claim to acceptance is excluded. In *Pride and Prejudice*, as in her later novels, Jane Austen vests faith in an élite — not one fixed by birth or station but one into which entry is contingent on qualities of character, one in which the Gardiners take the high place they deserve. But *Pride and Prejudice* differs, especially from *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, in the willingness of the élite to extend a certain generosity to the most undeserving of their fellows. Whether that sort of generosity is a mark of right-thinking or a mark of the novelist's youthful optimism is a question, perhaps, for moralists and not a criterion of the degree of excellence achieved by *Pride and Prejudice*.

