Throwing Shade at Netherfield:
Helping Students Understand Bad Manners in *Pride and Prejudice*

Dr. Hope Rogers, Pace Academy

Last year, while talking up *Pride and Prejudice* to my students, I promised them that they would find it relatable because Lizzy has an embarrassing mom. The day after they read the chapter about Mrs. Bennet visiting Netherfield, I asked, "Well, wasn't she embarrassing?" But they hadn't found her embarrassing, because they didn't recognize her dialogue as socially inappropriate. They also found Caroline's behavior inscrutable, missing the subtext that she wants to marry Mr. Darcy. Far from being relatable, they had found the chapters unintelligible. This experience made me realize that I needed to more explicitly teach students about manners in the novel. After all, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel of manners, and characters constantly judge each other and are judged by Austen herself based on their social conduct. When students don't understand bad manners, they miss out on Austen's social commentary in the novel as a whole.

Publications aimed at teachers and students often have entries on class and money, but few talk directly about manners.[1] When manners do come up, they are often dismissed as snobby or artificial restrictions on behavior, often established at the expense of women.[2] A few sources

---

[1] For instance, the 3rd Norton Critical Edition of the novel includes a section on "Class and Money" but nothing on manners, and the British Library's website features an article on "Status, rank and class in Jane Austen's novels" but nothing on manners.
John Mullan, "Status, Rank and Class in Jane Austen's Novels," *British Library*, May 15, 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/status-rank-and-class-in-jane-austens-novels.

[2] For instance, manners are aligned with conformity in multiple articles on teaching Austen in *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*. Johanna M. Smith argues that propriety is used to enforce norms of femininity in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Pride and Prejudice*, and, in the 4th Norton Critical Edition of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elsie B. Michie contends that manners are established along gendered lines that vilify upper-class women.
See Gamer, Michael Gamer and Katrina O'Loughlin, "Teaching Jane Austen in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Cheryl A. Wilson and Maria H. Frawley (New York: Routledge, 2022); Juliette Wells, "Race, Privilege, and Relatability: A Practical Guide for College and Secondary Instructors," in *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Cheryl A. Wilson and Maria H. Frawley (New York: Routledge, 2022); Johanna M. Smith, "'I Am a Gentleman's Daughter': A Marxist-Feminist Reading of *Pride and Prejudice*," in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Pride and Prejudice*, edited by Marcia McClintock Folsom (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993), 67-73; and Elsie B. Michie, "Social Distinction in Jane Austen," in *Pride and Prejudice*, 4th Norton Critical Edition, edited by Donald Gray and Mary Favret (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

briefly mention that manners are a marker of internal moral values in the novel, but they largely

assume that the nature of those values is obvious or uninteresting.[3]

Paula Marantz Cohen insightfully explains this surprising lack of emphasis on manners in

Austen scholarship:

> Civility is a hallmark of Austen's novels. Beginning in the 20th century, when academics began to take Austen seriously, there was a tendency to diminish this aspect of her work. Lionel Trilling, the great mid-20th century literary critic, was an important advocate for including Austen in the university curriculum. He nonetheless distinguished between those who liked Austen for the right reasons (i.e., her moral depth and astute satire) and those who liked her for the wrong ones.
>
> He associated the latter group, whom he called "Janeites," with a female readership who were fixated on the trappings of the society she depicted: the formal gatherings, picnics and balls in which people behaved in carefully prescribed ways. Trilling and others distinguished between depth and surface in Austen—between what her novels were "really" about and the seemingly superficial elements that embroidered her world.
>
> But the dichotomy is a false one. It reflects a disregard for manners that began to emerge in the mid-20th century and has only accelerated since then. In fact, morals and manners, depth and surface, are inseparable in any healthy society. The profundity of Austen's novels is based on this recognition.[4]

I wholeheartedly agree with Cohen and contend that the link Trilling made between manners and

femininity is no coincidence, because Austen's concern with manners is very much a concern

with how women are treated. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen is revising norms for polite

behavior in ways that instilled respect for and empowered women, thus using manners not to

reinforce social hierarchies but to challenge them.

---

[3] For instance, the Oxford World Classics edition of *Pride and Prejudice* has an appendix on "Rank and Social Status" that features a paragraph on the connection between manners and morals, and Juliet McMaster's entry on "Class" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, though overall emphasizing social distinctions and snobbery, briefly discusses how morals and manners sometimes align in Austen's novels.
V.J., "Appendix A: Rank and Social Status," in *Pride and Prejudice*, Oxford World Classics 3rd ed., edited by James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 294; Juliet McMaster, "Class," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124-125.
[4] Paula Marantz Cohen, "Jane Austen Knows That Manners Make the Man," *WSJ*, September 13, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/jane-austen-knows-that-manners-make-the-man-11568412737

Manners in the Eighteenth Century[5]

To understand Austen's championing of manners, it helps to understand ideas about politeness in the eighteenth century.[6] Lawrence Klein explains that in eighteenth-century Britain, politeness was understood as "social agreeableness" and conventionally referred to as "the art of pleasing," particularly in conversation.[7] Criteria for politeness included "ease, freedom, liveliness, and, perhaps most important, reciprocity, which reigned in the self and its distorting effects."[8] Politeness was ideally the expression of inner virtue[9] and was often connected with moral reform:

> While the courtesy commonplace said that agreeableness seconded merit, it made clear that agreeableness was what actuated merit: without agreeableness, merit was sterile, unpersuasive, and ineffective. This insistence on effectiveness helps to explain why, in the eighteenth century, politeness was sometimes viewed as the necessary means for bringing out the best in oneself and in others. By being agreeable, it was said, social actors establish a trust that allows them then to tell the truth, to criticize, and to urge reforms on others without offending them.[10]

In particular, courtesy writers "sought to lay out what gentlemen were or should have been or should have aspired to be," explaining how they could virtuously live up to their social status.[11] Though it could be used to enforce social distinctions, politeness enabled the mingling of people from different ranks, as well as interactions between men and women.[12] As Soile Ylivuori writes, politeness was ostensibly based on "women's refining influence on men's manners" and thus

---

[5] For an overview of the information in this section, I highly recommend this podcast episode, which was the starting point for my own research: Melvyn Bragg, "Politeness," September 30, 2004, in *In Our Time,* produced by BBC Radio 4, podcast, MP3 audio, 41:49, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004y29m.

[6] Following Lawrence Klein's and, I believe, Austen's own practice, I will use terms like manners, politeness, and civility interchangeably in this paper. Lawrence Klein, "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 207, https://doi.org/10.2307/2738536.

[7] Lawrence E. Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002): 874, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3133532.

[8] Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," 875.

[9] Soile Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 20-21.

[10] Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," 875.

[11] Klein, "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness," 193.

[12] Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," 879, 881.

could be "a tool of empowerment for women, in the sense that it gave women power over men's

behaviour–or, supposedly, even over the nation's well-being."[13]

Of course, the reality often did not look so rosy. The association between women and

politeness gave rise to concerns that manners might make men effeminate.[14] Meanwhile, as

Ylivuori argues, norms of polite behavior were differentiated based on gender and actually

tended to disempower women.[15] She cites eighteenth-century essayist Joseph Addison's

discussion of women's refining influence on "rude" men as an example:

> According to Addison… only when [men and women] made peace and learned to live
> together did the men learn to become cleanly and courteous—while the women,
> becoming the object of the men's attention, developed feminine arts. In other words, as
> Addison concludes, 'the Women had learnt to Smile, and the Men to Ogle, the Women
> grew Soft, and the Men Lively.'[16]

In particular, liveliness was frequently singled out as a masculine expression of manners that was

inappropriate for modest English women.[17] Liveliness, along with qualities like forwardness and

self-assurance, was associated with dissipated urban amusements, the aristocracy, and

Frenchness[18] (we might think of Lady Delacour in Maria Edgeworth's 1801 novel *Belinda*).

Instead, women were instructed to be soft and submissive.

<p style="text-align:center;">*Politeness in* Pride and Prejudice</p>

The language of politeness is all over *Pride and Prejudice*. Characters are constantly

assessed for their agreeableness and civility. For instance, Austen's introduction of Bingley and

Darcy focuses on their contrasting manners:

---

[13] Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England*, 39, 42.
[14] Michèle Cohen, "'Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750–1830," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 322, https://doi.org/10.1086/427127. Cohen follows Claudia Johnson in reading the preference for Mr. Knightley over Frank Churchill in *Emma* as a rejection of Frenchified politeness and insincerity (see pp. 326-328). See also Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 191-203.
[15] Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England*, 42.
[16] Ylivuori, 40-1.
[17] Ylivuori, 32, 40-1.
[18] Ylivuori, 33.

> Mr. Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike: he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners… his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, and the report, which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year… he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend. (8)[19]

Bingley conforms to the ideals of eighteenth-century politeness: he is agreeable and eager to give and receive pleasure. As Jane later comments, "He is just what a young-man ought to be… sensible, good-humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!" (11). In contrast, Darcy is "disagreeable" (the adjective that, even more than "proud," is his most frequent epithet in the novel). His bad manners make clear to the company that he is "above being pleased" and unconcerned with giving them pleasure, as he makes clear in his disparagement of Lizzy's beauty and refusal to ask her to dance.

In keeping with the eighteenth-century understanding of politeness as "the art of pleasing," Austen roots politeness in the desire to give others pleasure and spare them pain; the words "pleasure" and "pain" appear over and over again in the narration. The imperative to promote others' pleasure and decrease their pain becomes the ethical heart of the novel. After Elizabeth learns of Darcy's kindness and generosity to his sister, servants, and tenants, Austen tells us, "As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship! How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! How much of good or evil must be done by him!" (185). The connection of "pleasure and pain" to "good and evil" reveals the moral basis for politeness: a concern for the happiness and well-being of others.

---

[19] All page numbers for *Pride and Prejudice* are for the Oxford World Classics edition. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Beyond this ethical orientation, Austen's presentation of manners in *Pride and Prejudice* makes two major interventions in norms for gendered behavior that have gone largely unnoticed by critics.[20] First, she emphasizes respect for women as the proper behavior of a gentleman. Second and more radically, she rejects gender differentiation in the norms of politeness, enabling greater freedom for her heroine.

Darcy's Manners

Darcy begins the novel with bad manners, and his character arc centers on him learning the value of civility and agreeableness. After his insulting proposal, Elizabeth calls him out for failing to behave in a "gentlemanlike manner" and connects his bad manners to his lack of respect and concern for others' happiness: "your manners impress[ed] me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others" (145). Darcy takes her reproof seriously, later confessing to her that he had been taught "to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, 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" (275). He learns that politeness is an expression of respect for others' worth as individuals and amends his behavior accordingly. During their visit to Pemberley, Lizzy and the Gardiners repeatedly

---

[20] As in resources aimed at teachers and students, scholarship about politeness in Austen tends to either ignore gender or to see propriety as a tool for restricting female behavior. One exception is Patricia Meyer Spacks's "Privacy, Dissimulation, and Propriety: Frances Burney and Jane Austen," which discusses how propriety could offer women privacy.
Spacks, "Privacy, Dissimulation, and Propriety: Frances Burney and Jane Austen," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 12, no. 4 (2000): 515-531, doi:10.1353/ecf.2000.0013. Examples of analyses uninterested in gender include Isabelle Bour, "Locke, Richardson, and Austen: Or, How to Become a Gentleman," *Persuasions*, no. 30 (2008): 159–69, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32db87c9-e70b-3c50-b6d9-96f0473b2482; Sarah E. Brown and Mary Jane Curry, "'Follies and Nonsense', Whims and Inconsistencies Do Divert Me': Politeness in *Pride and Prejudice*, Henry Fielding's 'An Essay on Conversation' and *Tom Jones*," *Persuasions*, no. 24 (2002): 47-58; Augusta Hardy, "'The Difference between True and False Politeness': *Pride and Prejudice* and a Sermon of Bishop Hurd," *Persuasions*, no. 41 (January 1, 2019): 213–22, https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d7ac1330-52b6-3454-8e1a-84be17c75e21; Martin Price, "Manners, Morals, and Jane Austen," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30, no. 3 (1975): 261–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/2933070; and James Sherry, "*Pride and Prejudice*: The Limits of Society," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19, no. 4 (1979): 609–22, https://doi.org/10.2307/450251.

comment on Darcy's agreeableness, civility, and desire to please. Darcy tells Lizzy that she has humbled him: "You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased" (275). Darcy's efforts to please Lizzy reflect his newfound respect for her worth, and his emphasis on his desire to please "a woman" reflects how his polite attitude toward Lizzy challenges gender norms.[21]

However, the fact that Darcy reforms due to Lizzy's rebuke initially appears to conform to the conservative myth of refining female influence. As Ylivuori describes, this myth actually disempowers women:

> Placing the task of controlling men's manners, along with their own, on women's shoulders was thus a strategic move, since women could only achieve this supposed position of power by assuming the normative position of demure femininity offered to them in didactic literature. This process of normalisation ultimately aimed at isolating women from power by producing ideal femininity—soft, non-rational, and essentially submissive. Therefore, by assuming the refining power over men, so condescendingly offered to them, women simultaneously relinquished their possibility of achieving autonomous agency.[22]

However, Lizzy's behavior and her dynamic with Darcy are a far cry from Addison's vision of polite society in which "the Women had learnt to Smile, and the Men to Ogle, the Women grew Soft, and the Men Lively."[23] Not at all soft, smiling, or submissive, Lizzy offers an incisive critique of Darcy's character and manners.

Nor does Darcy ever resemble the "rude unfinished Creature" Addison claimed a man was without refining female influence.[24] Even during the proposal scene, the greatest breakdown of civility between the two, he makes noteworthy efforts to maintain composure and decorum. For example, after Lizzy's initial rejection, Austen describes how "He was struggling for the

---

[21] My reading here is indebted to Claudia Johnson's account of the novel's reformist emphasis on Lizzy's happiness. Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 81-84.
[22] Ylivuori, 42.
[23] Quoted in Ylivuori, 40-41.
[24] Quoted in Ylivuori, 41.

appearance of composure, and would not open his lips till he believed himself to have attained it" (143). His effort at self-restraint and civility in this moment points to his desire to behave in a manner befitting a gentleman, and without that commitment to politeness Lizzy's reproof would have been ineffective.

In fact, Austen's innovation is that she does not make gender distinctions in polite behavior.[25] Instead, she holds Lizzy and Darcy to the same standard. During the proposal scene, she describes Lizzy's efforts at civility in terms strikingly similar to Darcy's: "Elizabeth felt herself growing more angry every moment; yet she tried to the utmost to speak with composure" (144). Their shared commitment to self-restraint and civility enables them to improve each other.[26] Darcy can amend his manners based on Lizzy's criticisms, and she in turn gains a better understanding of his character through the information in his letter, which is marked by the same attempts at politeness. Instead of the myth of feminine influence, Austen presents us with a vision of the reformist potential of manners, through which, to recall Klein's description, "social actors establish a trust that allows them then to tell the truth, to criticize, and to urge reforms on others without offending them."[27] By giving Lizzy access to this truth-telling power, Austen defies repressive norms of conduct for women, instead using her version of manners to amplify female voices and engender respect for them.[28]

Lizzy's Manners

---

[25] In this argument, I take inspiration from Claudia L. Johnson's reading of *Emma* as espousing masculine behaviors for men and women alike. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, 202.

[26] This emphasis on making a conscious effort to speak calmly and politely also appears in the scene in which Charlotte tells Lizzy that she is going to marry Mr. Collins, again indicating the friends' shared value for each other and commitment to manners.

[27] Klein, "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century," 875.

[28] Notably, Jane and Elizabeth's good manners are also key to Lydia's being allowed to return to Longbourn after her marriage: "His daughter's request, for such it might be considered, of being admitted into her family again, before she set off for the north, received at first an absolute negative. But Jane and Elizabeth, who agreed in wishing, for the sake of their sister's feelings and consequence, that she should be noticed on her marriage by her parents, urged him so earnestly, yet so rationally and so mildly, to receive her and her husband at Longbourn, as soon as they were married, that he was prevailed on to think as they thought, and act as they wished" (232-233).

Austen's choice to apply masculine standards of polite behavior to men and women alike also shapes her heroine's distinctive personality. Claudia Johnson highlights "Elizabeth's outrageous unconventionality which, judged by the standards set in conduct books and in conservative fiction, constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety."[29] What makes Lizzy so unconventional is that she is defined by the characteristics of a polite man. Austen describes Lizzy's "lively, playful disposition" (9) and narrator and characters alike comment on Lizzy's "wit and vivacity" (67, 81), her "easy and unaffected" manner (19), her good humor (178), and her high spirits (66). Jane's description of "what a young man ought to be" sounds strikingly like Lizzy herself: "sensible, good-humoured, lively… such happy manners! so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!" (11). While these qualities make Lizzy Austen's most delightful heroine, conduct writers frequently declared them improper for women. Lizzy's liveliness is her most distinctive characteristic, but, as discussed earlier, liveliness in particular was seen as incompatible with female modesty and decorum.

Indeed, other characters criticize Lizzy's manners. Caroline repeatedly derides Lizzy's manners as displaying "a mixture of pride and impertinence" (26), "conceit and impertinence" (39), "an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum" (27), and "self-sufficiency without fashion" (201). Caroline's criticisms make the problem clear: Lizzy does not act with the deference and submission expected of women, particularly those without fortunes. Rather than behaving in ways that reflect her dependent, inferior status, she treats those around her as equals, challenging the social hierarchy.

Critics like Susan Fraiman and D.A. Miller have argued that *Pride and Prejudice* tells the story of Lizzy's unconventional behavior being checked, focusing on her feelings of humiliation

---

[29] Johnson, *Jane Austen*, 75.

after reading Darcy's letter to contend that Lizzy is shamed into conformity.[30] Lizzy does come to regret her "strong expressions" to and about Mr. Darcy (168, 281), as well as the way in which she deviated from her commitment to pleasing due to her prejudice against him. She tells Darcy, "as for my manners—my behaviour to you was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not" (283-284). She wished to cause pain rather than pleasure, a violation of the ethical orientation underlying her manners, and thus comes to repent her behavior.

However, Lizzy's overall manners are validated and remain unchanged at the end of the novel. When he criticizes her family's impropriety in his letter, Darcy writes, "let it give you consolation to consider that to have conducted yourselves so as to avoid any share of the like censure is praise no less generally bestowed on you and your eldest sister than it is honourable to the sense and disposition of both" (148). In linking Lizzy's behavior to Jane's more traditionally feminine conduct, he might seem to be downplaying the unconventionality of her manners. However, he later directly says that he liked Lizzy for "the liveliness of [her] mind," which she recasts as impertinence, lest we miss that he likes her for the very behavior others have criticized (284). Darcy's sanction of Lizzy's manners is a radical rejection of contemporary norms for female behavior. Furthermore, we learn that her behavior is unchanged after her marriage:

> Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm at her lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry. Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself. (289)

---

[30] Susan Fraiman, "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet," in *Pride and Prejudice*, 3rd Norton Critical Edition, edited by Donald Gray (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 356-368; D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Again, Austen highlights Lizzy's "lively" manners and their unconventionality in treating male

authority figures as equals (Georgiana isn't just astonished; she's alarmed!). However, now her

manners have become normative, modeling for Georgiana that "a woman may take liberties with

her husband." The move away from Elizabeth and Darcy as particular individuals to "a woman"

and "her husband" suggests that these behaviors and the egalitarian power dynamic that they

reflect are meant to be imitated, by Georgiana but also potentially by readers. Through Lizzy's

manners, Austen created a new standard of female behavior, offering women the opportunity to

legitimately perform "masculine" characteristics. This new standard allowed not just additional

freedoms in terms of behavior but also an underlying assertion of equality between men and

women.[31]

But why is Mrs. Bennet embarrassing?

At this point, dear reader, you've probably forgotten about my students' question that

opened the essay: why is Mrs. Bennet embarrassing? With a better understanding of manners in

the novel and their significance, we're now ready to answer that question. To understand the

---

[31] As a final illustration of how normal Austen makes Lizzy's behavior, we can contrast it with Fanny Burney's self-presentation when she rejected a proposal as a young woman. Her family pressured her to accept the hand of an "unexceptional man with good prospects," but she persistently refused. In one conversation between her and her suitor, which Burney recorded in her journal, the following exchange occurred: "This is the severest decision!—I am persuaded, Madam, you cannot be so cruel?—Surely you must allow that the social state is what we were all meant for?—that we were created for one another?—that to form such a resolution is contrary to the design of our Being?— ' 'All this may be true,— 'said I; —'I have nothing to say in contradiction to it—but you know there are many odd Characters in the World—& I am one of them.' […] 'But surely—is not this—singular? —' 'I give you leave, Sir,' cried I, laughing, 'to think me singular—odd— Queer—nay, even whimsical, if you please'" (quoted in Ylivuori, 256). The scenario has tantalizing parallels to Lizzy's rejection of Mr. Collins (though Burney's journals were not published until after Austen's death, so Austen would not have read them), yet the characterization of the women's actions is remarkably different. As Ylivuori points out, "Burney's unorthodox decision to refuse a perfectly sensible marriage appears 'singular' to Barlow, and she readily admits to being an 'odd', 'queer', or even 'whimsical' character" (256-7). In contrast, Lizzy confidently describes herself as "a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart," and her decision garners the approval of her father and the author (83). In fact, Austen seems to sanction Lizzy's evaluation that it would actually be morally wrong for Lizzy to accept him: "the woman who marries him cannot have a proper way of thinking… You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger security for happiness" (103). Rather than merely subverting the norms of propriety, Austen is rewriting them.

manners of Mrs. Bennet and the other characters in the novel, students need to learn three skills: first, to recognize the links between decorum and class, which many students understand in economic but not social terms. Second, to locate indecorous behaviors in the novel on a spectrum from the merely embarrassing to the actually immoral. And third, to connect judgments of specific behaviors to Austen's critique and transformation of Regency norms around gender and class. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss four activities I use to teach my students these skills.

Activity 1

In a course on Jane Austen that we were co-teaching, Claudia Johnson began the class on *Pride and Prejudice* by explaining the novel to the students as a Cinderella story in which virtue is rewarded: the most virtuous woman gets to marry the prince. I found it to be an enormously useful comparison, so I begin my unit on the novel with a lesson explicitly on the relationship of Lizzy Bennet to Cinderella to help students understand how Austen's novel is updating ideals of femininity.

After talking about the basic parallels between the two heroine's stories, I ask students to identify the qualities celebrated in the heroines themselves: what is a virtuous woman like? We make lists on the board, and students are usually quick to identify that Lizzy is more assertive and less obedient. I also push them to think about similarities: both women are white, conventionally attractive, chaste, and come from middle to upper class families. After comparing Cinderella and Lizzy, we watch a modern update to the Cinderella story: Taylor Swift's "Bejeweled" music video, which riffs on the fairy tale: Swift is cast as Cinderella, mocked by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters who will not let her go to the prince's talent contest; the

winner will be rewarded with a castle and marriage to the prince.[32] Swift, however, manages to attend bedecked in jewels and wins the talent contest. She accepts the castle but turns down the prince's proposal. After watching the video, we discuss how Swift updates the ideal of a virtuous woman, particularly by making her Cinderella angry, sexual, and uninterested in marriage, as well as how she reinforces other norms for the character (white, attractive, middle class).

Through this lesson, students go into their reading of the novel understanding that Austen is updating the ideal of femininity and with some concept (via the comparison with Cinderella) of traditional norms like passivity and submissiveness.

Activity 2

In this lesson, I introduce students to manners as a category, telling students that they relate to both class and morals.[33] Students are often unaccustomed to thinking about class as something other than economic status. To help them start thinking about more social aspects of class, I ask them to come up with behaviors that are markers of good taste or of being cool. In particular, I prompt them to think about restaurants and why it doesn't demonstrate good taste/coolness to eat at Chili's. We talk about the associations of restaurants like Chili's with middle class, suburban life[34] and the idea of "middle class fancy," a very class-conscious term for activities and places seen as fancy by members of the middle class but as decidedly middlebrow by more cosmopolitan citizens. (I try to emphasize the snobbery and condescension inherent in many of these associations rather than normalizing them and profess my own deep love for eating at Chili's.) Once students seem to be getting a handle on class as a social identity related

---

[32] Taylor Swift, "Bejeweled," *YouTube*, October 25, 2022, video, 5:53, https://youtu.be/b7QlX3yR2xs?si=y6KT56hk75BKe8J8

[33] Prior to this activity, I give students background on rank and money in the novel. I found Johanna M. Smith's Diagram of Class Structure for Teaching *Pride and Prejudice* particularly helpful. Smith, "A Marxist-Feminist Reading," 72.

[34] Chili's actually serves as an important class signifier on the show *The Office*, which many of my students still watch.

to status, I remind them again of how manners relate to both class and morals, and then we turn

to the passage in which Mrs. Bennet visits Netherfield (Volume 1, Chapter 9).

I tell the students upfront that Mrs. Bennet's behavior is embarrassing, and we read

through her dialogue statement by statement, discussing why each one demonstrates bad

manners. As we discuss, I ask students to identify whether the violation has more to do with

class or morals. The gaucheness of Mrs. Bennet's defense of the country, ending with her boast

that "we dine with four and twenty families," has more to do with class snobbery: she fails to

recognize the inferiority of some aspects of provincial life much like a person dubbed "middle

class fancy" fails to recognize that Olive Garden is an inferior restaurant (32-33). In many other

cases, however, she is embarrassing due to moral failures: her rude combativeness with Darcy in

the country vs. town exchange, her insulting comments about Charlotte, and her boasting about

Jane. Though her negative portrayal is not free from classism, Mrs. Bennet's bad manners mostly

involve failing to seek to give others pleasure and spare them pain in conversations. This is

highlighted later in the book in her behavior's effect on Jane. When Mrs. Bennet incessantly

discusses Mr. Bingley's return to Netherfield, Jane tells Lizzy, "I can hardly bear to hear it thus

perpetually talked of. My mother means well; but she does not know, no one can know, how

much I suffer from what she says" (247). Mrs. Bennet's manners are bad because she fails to

consider others, thinking only of herself.

I end the class by drawing students' attention to how, although Caroline and Darcy

initially seem like foils to Mrs. Bennet, genteel where she is vulgar, Austen actually uses them as

mirrors due to their shared bad manners. Darcy offends Mrs. Bennet by condescendingly saying

that the country has "a very confined and unvarying society" (rude), and Bingley has to "force[]

his younger sister to be civil also, and say what the occasion required. She performed her part,

indeed, without much graciousness" (34). Austen criticizes both lower and upper class characters

for their failures of civility, thus challenging the class hierarchy rather than simply reinforcing

it.[35]

Activity 3

After a day discussing Darcy's proposal, I ask my students to turn their attention to his

subsequent letter to Elizabeth and to consider his allegation that "The situation of your mother's

family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so

frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and

occasionally even by your father" (148). Depending on the class, I either give students examples

of the Bennets behaving badly from the Netherfield Ball (Volume 1, Chapter 18) or ask them to

find examples on their own, pointing them to that chapter as a good place to look. I then remind

students that manners are about both class and morals and draw a scale on the board with

"embarrassing" at one end and "immoral" at the other. I ask them to plot their examples on the

scale and then to defend their reasoning. Students usually agree that Mary's musical performance

belongs on the embarrassing end of the spectrum, though it is not without a moral dimension,

since she is motivated by a desire to show off. Mr. Collins's introduction of himself to Mr. Darcy

ends up somewhere in the middle of the scale, since there is an element of class snobbery ("it

must belong to Mr. Darcy, the superior in consequence, to begin the acquaintance," as Lizzy

advises her cousin) but also a moral failure in Mr. Collins's "mixture of pride and

obsequiousness, self-importance and humility" (74, 53). However, students rarely identify the

worst violation, according to Austen:[36] Mr. Bennet's negligence and disrespect. Both of these

---

[35] As I always remind my students, in nineteenth-century novels, the middle class is the best class.

[36] One group of students hilariously insisted that staying late at the party after everyone else had left was the worst possible moral infraction.

failings come up at the Netherfield Ball in his clumsy, embarrassing way of ending Mary's

performance, and Lizzy dwells on them after reading Darcy's letter:

> Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a
> husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for
> his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not
> overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation
> and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so
> highly reprehensible. But she had never felt so strongly as now the disadvantages which
> must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the
> evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents—talents which, rightly used, might
> at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging
> the mind of his wife. (175-176)

Mr. Bennet's "impropriety" is squarely in moral territory, since it involves "exposing his wife to

the contempt of her own children," behavior that Austen calls "highly reprehensible." His failure

to show his wife basic respect and to parent and protect his daughters is contrary to Austen's

ethical value for seeking the well-being of others and recognizing their value. Mr. Bennet's

relative power as a gentleman raises the stakes of his incivility. Lizzy's words about Darcy also

apply to her father, though to a lesser degree: "How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power

to bestow!" (185). For Austen, as for Spiderman, with great power comes great responsibility:

responsibility to give others pleasure and spare them from pain through one's actions and one's

manners.

<div align="center">*Activity 4*</div>

Once my students have gained a greater understanding of the connection between

manners, class, and morals, I want them to start thinking more systematically about Austen's use

of foils to define the characteristics of Lizzy and Darcy and thus of the ideal man and woman.

Alex Woloch outlines this system in *The One vs. the Many*, explaining that *Pride and Prejudice*

is "a paradigm of the bildungsroman, not simply developing a young protagonist, but also

developing the protagonist as an aesthetic construct. The 'perfect qualities' of Elizabeth, as

developing character, not only motivate but are ingeniously and inescapably ramified through her

achieved centrality, as protagonist."[37] That is, the novel is invested in defining the qualities of the

ideal protagonist, and these qualities are demonstrated structurally by her centrality as a

character. Woloch continues:

> The process of interior character development—embodied in the titles *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*—is essentially a via negativa, a dialectical process of rejecting different extremes (too much pride, too much sensibility, etc.) to find a middle ground. This process accommodates itself perfectly with an asymmetrical structure of characterization, as various minor characters exemplify certain traits or ways of thinking that the protagonist must learn to discard… The dismissal of each individual character (along with the characteristics into which they are subsumed) points to a larger process—the dismissal of an entire mode of character for another, what we could see as the persistent transformation of characters as social beings into character as the reflection of internal, abstract qualities.[38]

As I tell my students, if you're a protagonist, the world *does* revolve around you, and minor

characters exist to define the ideal qualities of the hero and heroine. In particular, Austen uses

minor characters to create nuanced distinctions about proper manners. For example, Elizabeth

compares the manners of Bingley and his sisters: "She was received, however, very politely by

them; and in their brother's manners there was something better than politeness—there was

good-humour and kindness" (25). Woloch, discussing the passage, writes, "the qualitative

distinction between real politeness and what we might call politesse is constructed only through a

social comparison."[39] While the text often compares two characters at a time, as Woloch

describes, Austen actually uses sets of foils to position Lizzy and Darcy on multiple spectra of

possible behaviors. For example, she criticizes Jane's excessive reserve, which too effectively

hides her true feelings, but also Lydia's excessive lack of reserve in her wild, inconsiderate

speech and actions. Lizzy is positioned in between as exemplifying the proper amount of reserve.
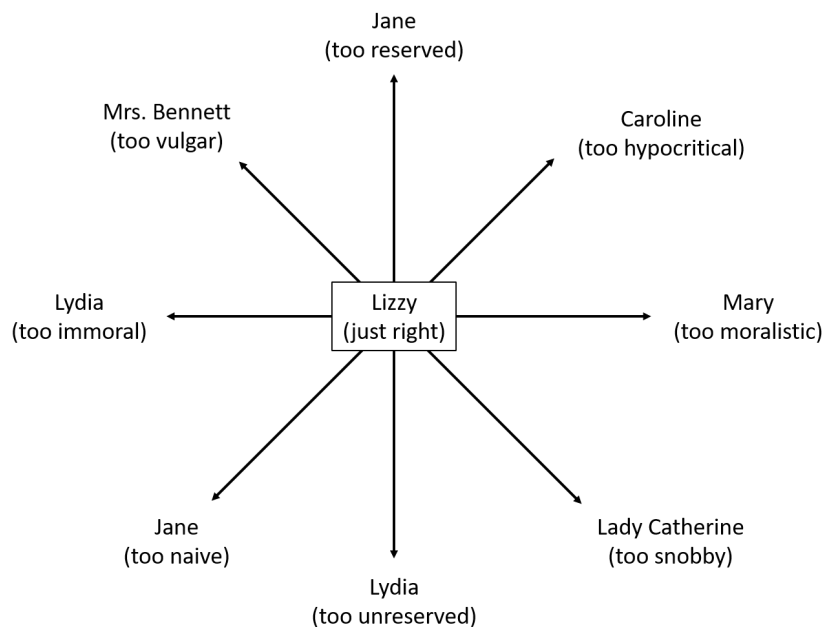
---

[37] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 46.
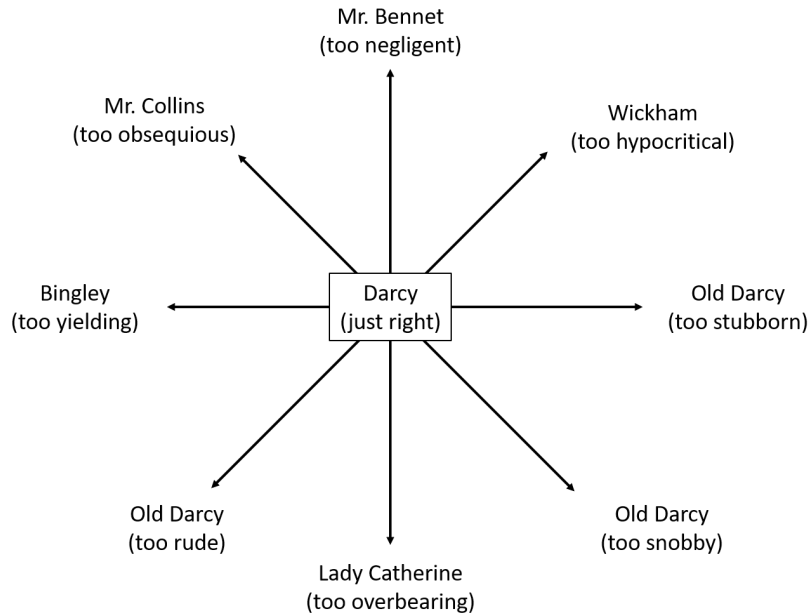[38] Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 55.
[39] Woloch, 54.

Darcy is often positioned between his own former characteristics and other characters. For example, Darcy is initially too rude in the name of honesty, whereas Wickham is too hypocritical, deceiving those around him through his manners. After his reform, Darcy achieves the happy medium of these qualities: honest but also polite.

I teach my students about Austen's use of foils using the analogy of Goldilocks and her quest for the "just right." In the fairy tale, Goldilocks tests out various foods and furniture in the Three Bears' home. She declares one bed too hard, another too soft, before settling on the third as "just right." Likewise, one bowl of porridge is too hot, another too cold, and the third "just right." I ask my students to brainstorm sets of "Goldilocks foils" in the novel and draw charts of the characters on the board (see figures below).[40] Often, they find it easier to come up with one foil (like that Jane is too reserved) and then consider what trait would be the opposite and what character represents that trait.

Mr. Bennet
(too negligent)

Mr. Collins
(too obsequious)

Wickham
(too hypocritical)

Bingley
(too yielding)

Darcy
(just right)

Old Darcy
(too stubborn)

Old Darcy
(too rude)

Old Darcy
(too snobby)

Lady Catherine
(too overbearing)

Once the traits are on the board, I push students to think about how Austen uses them to challenge social norms and hierarchies. For instance, we talk about how reserve was generally mandated for Regency women and restricted their ability to express themselves, so by suggesting that it was possible to be too reserved, Austen challenges contemporary manners to offer women greater freedom of behavior. At the same time, she uses Lydia to warn against the opposite extreme of indiscretion and imprudence. Through this activity, students gain a more nuanced picture of Austen's portrayal of the ideal man and woman, and of the reformist, egalitarian version of manners that she advocates for in the novel.

Conclusion

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen emphasizes manners as an ethical practice, expressing acknowledgement of others' worth and concern for their well-being. Focusing on manners in the novel helps students understand Austen's challenges to Regency norms, but I also hope that it will cultivate an appreciation of the value of manners, something that our own society often lacks. As Paula Marantz Cohen writes,

> So many in our country today feel disrespected, dismissed and unheard. They, in turn, have abandoned civil discourse for unmannerly outrage. We would go some way to rectifying the divide in America if we were able to empower the Mr. Knightleys over the thoughtless Frank Churchills and insidiously immoral Mr. Eltons, and reassert the link between manners and character, surface and depth, that Austen dramatizes so eloquently.[41]

Austen particularly uses manners to instill respect for women, and this message is becoming increasingly urgent as our male students are drawn into the online orbit of figures like Andrew Tate, whose brand of masculinity is built on explicit misogyny.[42] Austen presents an alternative model of masculinity, rooted in politeness and recognition of women's equal humanity and dignity. Maybe it's idealistic to hope that our students will emulate Darcy and Lizzy, but, as Austen herself did, we can celebrate their good manners as the ideal.

---

[41] Cohen, "Jane Austen Knows That Manners Make the Man."

[42] Lisa Miller, "Tate-Pilled: What a Generation of Boys Have Found in Andrew Tate's Extreme Male Gospel," *New York Magazine*, March 14, 2023, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/andrew-tate-jail-investigation.html.

Bibliography

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*, 3rd Norton Critical ed. Edited by Donald Gray. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*, Oxford World's Classics ed. Edited by James Kinsley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Bour, Isabelle. "Locke, Richardson, and Austen: Or, How to Become a Gentleman." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, no. 30 (2008): 159–69. https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32db87c9-e70b-3c50-b6d9-96f0473b2482.

Bragg, Melvyn. "Politeness." Produced by BBC Radio 4. *In Our Time*. September 30, 2004. Podcast, MP3 audio, 41:49. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004y29m.

Brown, Sarah E., and Mary Jane Curry. "'Follies and Nonsense', Whims and Inconsistencies Do Divert Me': Politeness in *Pride and Prejudice*, Henry Fielding's 'An Essay on Conversation' and *Tom Jones*." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, no. 24 (2002): 47-58.

Cohen, Michèle. "'Manners' Make the Man: Politeness, Chivalry, and the Construction of Masculinity, 1750–1830." *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 312–29. https://doi.org/10.1086/427127.

Cohen, Paula Marantz. "Jane Austen Knows That Manners Make the Man." *WSJ*, September 13, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/jane-austen-knows-that-manners-make-the-man-11568412737

Fraiman, Susan "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet." In *Pride and Prejudice,* 3rd Norton Critical ed. Edited by Donald Gray, 356-368. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Gamer, Michael, and Katrina O'Loughlin. "Teaching Jane Austen in the Twenty-First Century." In *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Cheryl A. Wilson and Maria H. Frawley. New York: Routledge, 2022.

Hardy, Augusta. "'The Difference between True and False Politeness': *Pride and Prejudice* and a Sermon of Bishop Hurd." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, no. 41 (January 1, 2019): 213–22. https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d7ac1330-52b6-3454-8e1a-84be17c75e21.

Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Johnson, Claudia L. *Equivocal Beings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Klein, Lawrence E. "Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century." *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002): 869–98. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3133532.

Klein, Lawrence. "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 186–214. https://doi.org/10.2307/2738536.

McMaster, Juliet. "Class." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster, 115-130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Michie, Elsie B. "Social Distinction in Jane Austen." In *Pride and Prejudice*, 4th Norton Critical Edition, edited by Donald Gray and Mary Favret. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Miller, D. A. *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Miller, Lisa. "Tate-Pilled: What a Generation of Boys Have Found in Andrew Tate's Extreme Male Gospel." *New York Magazine*, March 14, 2023. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/andrew-tate-jail-investigation.html

Mullan, John. "Status, Rank and Class in Jane Austen's Novels." *British Library*, May 15, 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/status-rank-and-class-in-jane-austens -novels

Price, Martin. "Manners, Morals, and Jane Austen." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30, no. 3 (1975): 261–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/2933070.

Sherry, James. "Pride and Prejudice: The Limits of Society." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19, no. 4 (1979): 609–22. https://doi.org/10.2307/450251.

Smith, Johanna M. "'I Am a Gentleman's Daughter': A Marxist-Feminist Reading of *Pride and Prejudice*." In *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Pride and Prejudice*, edited by Marcia McClintock Folsom, 67-73. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1993.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "Privacy, Dissimulation, and Propriety: Frances Burney and Jane Austen." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 12, no. 4 (2000): 515-531. doi:10.1353/ecf.2000.0013.

Swift, Taylor. "Bejeweled." *YouTube*. October 25, 2022. Video, 5:53. https://youtu.be/b7QlX3yR2xs?si=y6KT56hk75BKe8J8

V.J. "Appendix A: Rank and Social Status." In *Pride and Prejudice*, Oxford World Classics 3rd ed., edited by James Kinsley, 291-294. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Wells, Juliette. "Race, Privilege, and Relatability: A Practical Guide for College and Secondary Instructors." In *The Routledge Companion to Jane Austen*, edited by Cheryl A. Wilson and Maria H. Frawley. New York: Routledge, 2022.

Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Ylivuori, Soile. *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England*. New York: Routledge, 2019.