

"A PAIR OF FINE EYES": JANE AUSTEN'S TREATMENT OF SEX

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen's novels are about courtship and marriage. But it is a truth almost as universally ignored that they are also very much about sex. As a social force, as an embodiment of value systems, as an index of personal maturity, the role of marriage in Jane Austen's work has been ably and extensively examined. But as the consummation of sexual attraction between a man and a woman and as the reconciliation of "maleness" and "femaleness," her conception of marriage has seldom been discussed.

One reason for the imbalance of emphasis lies in our preconceptions about her personality. Few critics consciously share Marvin Mudrick's view of a Jane Austen armored in impenetrable wit and muslin against the "personally involving aspects of sex" and the "unknown adult commitment of sexual love." But his vision of her as a defensively ironic "genteel spinster" does represent a popular and subtly pervasive stereotype. The phrases he uses about her—"routed by the sexual question," "fogged in bourgeois morality," opposed to "sexual vitality," and in favor of "frigidity as a standard of sexual conduct"—while inaccurate in themselves, serve to suggest the kinds of presuppositions to which Jane Austen has been subject and which have rendered the sexual aspects of her work less visible than they should be.¹

A second reason that the sexual element in Jane Austen's fiction has tended to be ignored lies in her art itself. The coolness and deftness of her surface and the interplay of irony and wit have made her novels seem more purely cerebral than they are and have reinforced the presumptions about her temperament. A merciless satirist of false or excessive feeling, she has wrongly been seen as suspicious of all feeling; and her very desire to subsume sex within marriage has somehow made her seem

to be endorsing marriage without sex. Because the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction make it almost impossible for the hero and heroine to touch and even, at a certain level of frankness, to speak, the tendency has been to see the overt levels of plot and dialogue as reflecting her total vision of sex and marriage. And yet her novels are no less subtle and realistic here than in their depiction of any other forms of human relationship.

I shall try in this essay to redress the balance and, particularly in the first portion, to single out and emphasize Jane Austen's handling of physical sexuality. Jane Austen's books treat many other serious themes as well: art and nature, feeling and reason, freedom and order, the individual and society. It is precisely because all these issues come to a focus in marriage and are dramatized in her novels through the incidents of wooing and wedding that we cannot leave sex out. If marriage is the ultimate source of social order and the very soul of the status quo, it achieves this harmony only through the disruptive and disorderly force of sex. The predominant novelist of social stability, Jane Austen is also the chronicler of the sexual selectivity that creates it. As a writer whose books all end with marriages, her problem was not that she failed to recognize the foreplay of attraction and repulsion, of looking and liking, of teasing and touching that can lead to matrimony, but that she could not express her views directly. Her indirections, however, are surprisingly subtle and frank.

In studying Jane Austen's "indirections" we must be aware of the limited range of explicit statement allowed to a novelist of her generation. Although the easy eighteenth-century conventions of her youth allowed her to read what she later termed the "impassioned and most exceptionable parts of Richardson," and, as we shall see, the more indelicate portions of Shakespeare, even male authors by the turn of the century could no longer speak freely of plackets and bosoms.² We have only to look at Scott—by all accounts a clubbish man in company—to see how pervasively these taboos affected fiction. For a woman, of course, the problem was compounded; and though Jane Austen was closer than Scott in some ways to her eighteenth-century fictional forebears, she, too, was bound by pre-Victorian limitations of subject matter which had already turned physical sex into a topic for covert implication rather than overt description.

The trouble with covert implication is that we cannot be sure if the implication is really there or if we have simply imagined it. It is therefore useful to begin by examining Jane Austen's use of literary allusion, since it involves the kind of deliberate and conscious choice of materials that assures not only that *we* know what she is doing but that *she* does, too.

The most familiar use of another literary work to expand a situation in her novels is the sustained use of the play *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park*. The explicit and immodest relationship between Anhalt and Amelia in the play foreshadows the relationship that will develop between Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford as the actors of these parts, just as the role of Agatha, which Julia Bertram wants to play, is prophetic of her final condition as an abandoned mistress.³ Henry Crawford's protean nature is suggested by his willingness to take any male part in *Lovers' Vows*. His moral instability is further elucidated by his almost ventriloquistic reading of all the voices in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, a play about a great misuser of women, from which words like "maidenhead" and "em-balling" had not been bowdlerized in Jane Austen's lifetime. Fanny's story, too, involves a literary allusion, since her name, Fanny Price (though not, as we shall see, without a possible cant interpretation) comes from Crabbe's *Parish Register*, where Fanny Price is a chaste and lovely maiden, who resists a sexually eager young squire to marry the pure youth of her choice.

A more daring use of literary allusion to express the inexpressible occurs in *Sense and Sensibility*, very much a book about sexual wiles and entanglements, with its highly charged seducer, Willoughby, and his willing victim, Marianne. What Jane Austen is trying to imply about the lovers, though she cannot directly say it, comes out in an early episode regarding Willoughby's offer of a horse. Marianne, though eager to go galloping with him, is obliged for reasons of economy and prudence to reject the animal he has offered her. He, however, will not accept her refusal and, bending closely over her, whispers an ardent plea that she continue to call it hers. "The horse is still yours," he says, "though you cannot use it now. I shall only keep it till you can claim it. When you leave Barton to form your own establishment, Queen Mab shall receive you."⁴ Willoughby's statement, with its breathy intimacy, seems merely another example of Jane Austen's skillfully handled characterizations until we remember the actual Queen Mab passage:

This is the hag when maids lie on their backs
That presses them and learns them first to bear,

and recognize its applicability to their relationship. Willoughby later confesses that his motive was never wholly honorable. But this early allusion tells us precisely what his intentions are, what he is really offering Marianne, and what will be her fate if she leaves the protection of her mother's home. It defines Marianne for us, too, since she seems almost as eager to ride Queen Mab—to gallop on the "fairies' midwife"—as Willoughby is to ride with her. While not as plainly sexual a character as

the hot little Lucy Steele, Marianne is far from the naively sentimental dreamer that she is often said to be and far more than an exemplar of romantic sensibility. As her later attack of old-fashioned "hysteria" shows, she is very much a creature of flesh and blood, who becomes psychosomatically and then physically ill when her desires are thwarted.

Another literary allusion, following closely on the Queen Mab passage, reaffirms Jane Austen's intention to underscore Willoughby's and Marianne's relationship. We are told that Willoughby "presently took up her scissors and cut off a long lock of her hair, for it was all tumbled down her back; and he kissed it, and folded it up in a piece of white paper and put it into his pocketbook" (I, 60). Willoughby is not quite Pope's baron and Marianne is hardly Belinda—but the ravishing of the hair, which meets with no resistance from the lady, carries the same unvarnished sexual connotation.

Puns and riddles, too, suggest that Jane Austen was rather more knowing than has been realized. Perhaps Mary Crawford's allusion to the "*Rears and Vices* of admirals" is only an accident, but its cynical sexuality seems very much in character. However, when Mr. Woodhouse—dear, valetudinarian, fussy Mr. Woodhouse—makes an improper allusion, we must begin to wonder about his creator's intentions. And yet, the seemingly innocuous riddle about "Kitty, a fair but frozen maid" that Mr. Woodhouse keeps trying to recall and that Emma actually transcribes into her album is a naughty one, indeed:

Kitty, a fair but frozen maid,
Kindled a flame I still deplore;
The hood-wink'd boy I call'd in aid,
Much of his near approach afraid,
So fatal to my suit before.

.....
To Kitty, Fanny now succeeds,
She kindles slow but lasting fires;
With care my appetite she feeds;
Each day some willing victim bleeds,
To satisfy my strange desires.

Say, by what title, or what name,
Must I this youth address?
Cupid and he are not the same
Tho' both can raise or quench a flame—
I'll kiss you if you guess.⁵

The riddle is taken from John Almon's *New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, a late eighteenth-century melange of odes on Johnson's dictionary and verses on a three-seated privy, and is said to have been written by

Garrick. It involves a series of sly allusions. Read with a knowledge of eighteenth-century slang, the first stanza reveals itself to be about a man who has contracted venereal disease ("a flame I yet deplore") from patronizing "frozen Kitty." (A "forward Kittie," as in some versions, would be a bold prostitute.) Having cured himself in the omitted second stanza, he relates how he now derives pleasures from frequenting only the virginal Fanny. ("Fanny" in eighteenth-century and in modern British slang = female pudendum.) The reference in the last three lines—"some willing victim bleeds"—is literally hymeneal. The solution to the final stanza, "a chimney sweep," must have been productive of much drawing-room mirth, not simply because it so cleverly catches up all the fire similes that run through the poem but because "chimney sweeping" was a well-known cant term for sexual intercourse.⁶

Precisely what kind of game Jane Austen is playing with Mr. Woodhouse and her readers is hard to tell. Given the obviousness of the language, it seems unlikely she did not understand it, but it is hard to know whether to take Mr. Woodhouse's repeated references to the riddle as a sign of his naiveté or simply as one of the many ways in which he is made to embody the tastes and manners of an earlier age. But his recollected pun should remind us that the England of Mr. Woodhouse's youth—and of Jane Austen's, too—was far from prudish. Although the printed riddle books of the early nineteenth century tended to be chaste, those of the 1740s and 1750s were frequently improper. In fact, one could probably trace the rise of post-Evangelical propriety with considerable accuracy simply by seeing when the word "pen" in the riddle books ceased to mean a sexual tool and became a mere instrument of writing.⁷

Born in 1775, although she did not publish her first novel until 1811, Jane Austen must have known both worlds. Her complicity with regard to Mr. Woodhouse raises questions about her intentions elsewhere. What, for example, were she and Crabbe thinking about when they named their virginal heroine "Fanny Price"? Is it simply an accident that the broad-humored Middletons in *Sense and Sensibility* find the first initial of Elinor's lover so conducive to constant hilarity: "The letter F—— had likewise been brought forward, and found productive of such countless jokes that its character as the wittiest letter in the alphabet had long been established" (I, 125). Does F—— really stand for Ferrars? Or does it stand for that four-letter verb, omitted by Johnson and most subsequent lexicographers, but given with the definition "foeminam subagitare" in Nathaniel Bailey's highly popular octavo volume, *An Universal Etymological Dictionary*, first published in 1721 and reprinted several times thereafter.

Although we cannot have the same degree of certainty that Jane Austen's use of what the twentieth century calls sex symbolism was as deliberate as her use of allusions, puns, and riddles, her referents are so obvious at times that it is hard to believe they are unconscious. *Mansfield Park*, Marvin Mudrick's shrine of the sexual taboo and Kingsley Amis's palace of prudery, is curiously rich in sex symbols—perhaps because it is more a hothouse than a refrigerator.⁸ It nurtures not only the blooming Bertram girls and the sexually dynamic Mary Crawford but also the nubile Fanny Price, whose growth to womanhood, in both the moral and physical sense, forms the mainspring of the novel. It is an interesting comment on nineteenth-century social values that nobody really notices Fanny until she reaches puberty. In a recent article, Ann Banfield rightly points out that the "notice others begin to take of Fanny is a measure of their increasing (or decreasing) vision and judgment."⁹ But, like other critics, she has not observed that Fanny's importance also depends on her being "in" or "out"—ripe for the marriage market or not yet sufficiently matured to warrant interest.

In a scene full of subtle undercurrents, Edmund Bertram reports that his father has noticed Fanny's maturation immediately upon his return from Antigua. "'Your complexion is so improved!—and you have gained so much countenance!—and your figure—Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it—it is but an uncle. If you cannot bear an uncle's admiration, what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.—You must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman'" (III, 198). But Fanny must blush, for it is her newfound womanliness (here signified by her figure) that she cannot handle, either as it makes her conscious of her attraction toward Edmund or as it attracts Henry Crawford toward her. Her problem is not that she is a prude, but that she must pretend to be one. (In her inability to express her feelings because of her subordinate role in the family, she is a forerunner of such frustrated Brontë heroines as Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe—women who must conceal their emotions no matter what they feel.)

Given the theme of maturation, it is no wonder that sexual implications abound in *Mansfield Park*. Tony Tanner has pointed out the sexual significance of the locked garden at Sotherton, and Gerald Gould has explored the gate scene further and showed how the various sexual relationships among the characters are foreshadowed by the symbolic use of gates, keys, gardens, wilderness, and pointed spikes.¹⁰ However, no one to my knowledge has pointed out that the rakish Henry Crawford's chain is too big to fit through the hole in Fanny's cross but that her beloved Edmund's chain slips through quite nicely. Nor has anything been made of Fanny's horseback riding. She is frightened of riding, as we imagine

she would be at first, but riding Edmund's mare gives her great pleasure. When Mary Crawford, a born horsewoman, takes it away from her and starts riding with Edmund herself, Fanny, with almost clinical accuracy, develops a headache.

Jane Austen, then, is not so innocent as we have imagined her, nor devoid of resources for expressing what she knows. But while I think it important to demonstrate the exclusively sexual element in her novels, I have isolated these examples from their context only to prove the point that she is neither ignorant nor fearful, and certainly not prim. What is more important about Jane Austen's art, however, is the way in which she fuses the physical with the emotional and the intellectual to create a sense of total human relationships. It is a restrained art that limits its subject matter and finds its material in the commonplaces of daily activity—in speaking and smiling, in walking and dancing. But it is a translucent surface that reveals the emotions underneath. The techniques she uses and the values she prescribes can best be seen in *Pride and Prejudice*, her fullest study of male-female relationships.

In attempting to trace the course of a love affair, the French romancers of the seventeenth century had recourse to a device called the *carte du tendre*—a map which treated the progress of affection through all the pleasant territories of Inclination, Complaisance, Tenderness, and Respect and all the hostile areas of Pride, Negligence, Indiscretion, and Mischance. *Pride and Prejudice* explores much the same geography of the feelings, but never abstractly and always against the familiar background of the English landscape. Because its hero and heroine are Elizabeth and Darcy, the most articulate of all Jane Austen's protagonists, these conscious and unconscious attractions and repulsions are usually turned into language, into a surface structure of wit and epigram. But body language is also speech and, like purely verbal communication, reveals attitudes of aversion and attraction. Exemplified by gestures and actions that are at once realistic and metaphoric, the method is brilliantly revealing.

Nowhere is the combination of realism and metaphor more clearly shown than in her use of the dance. It is possible to reconstruct many of the social customs of the age simply by studying the descriptions of balls and dances in *Emma*, in *Mansfield Park*, in *Pride and Prejudice*, and even in *Northanger Abbey*; but it is also possible to see the ritualized encounters of the ballrooms as indicators of social and sexual definition. What partners *may* dance with one another, what partners *do* dance with one another—what woman the man chooses, what man the woman entices or resists—the pairings and nonpairings involved all provide dramatizations of the mating process that are seldom as visible elsewhere. Given the inhibitions of early nineteenth-century customs, the

dance is one of the few places where choosing is apparent and touching is allowed. Jane Austen knew precisely what she meant when she says that "to be fond of dancing [is] the first step toward falling in love" (II, 9).

It is not surprising, then, that the first dance at Netherfield serves to define the male protagonists. Bingley, the normative man in this novel, enjoys dancing.¹¹ Lively and unreserved, he dances every dance, moving from woman to woman until he fixes his feelings on Jane. The sense of flow and ease that we associate with Bingley throughout the novel appears here very plainly; he is both socially and sexually relaxed, lacking depth and firmness perhaps, but free to give and receive affection. Darcy, by contrast, is restrained. Although he has all the attributes of an attractive male—a fine, tall person, good features, and noble bearing—he is constrained and solitary. While the others pair off in dancing couples, he walks about the room alone. He is not insensible to female beauty, as his comments about Jane Bennet prove, but he is too constricted within himself—too "fastidious" Bingley calls him—to seek a partner. Ironically, proud and intolerant as he may be, his very inaccessibility enhances his worth.

At the second ball, even more than on the first occasion, Jane Austen makes clear the role of the dance as part of the courtship ritual and begins to use it, as she will continue to do, to define the sexual relationships of her protagonists. When Sir William Lucas calls dancing "one of the first refinements of polished societies," he provokes Mr. Darcy to the startling rejoinder that "it has the advantage of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world. Every savage can dance" (II, 25). This is not just Darcy's superciliousness, though his snobbish pride is certainly involved. It is Jane Austen's way of reminding us of the very basic elements that are evinced in a man and woman's moving rhythmically together, whether in a primitive society or at the Court of St. James. (It is interesting that a little later in the novel all Mr. Collins's pomposity and stupidity are summed up in a description of his dancing: "Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of release from him was extasy" [II, 90]).

Dancing as a courtship metaphor occurs for a third, though not a final time, in one of the drawing-room scenes at Netherfield. Anxious to attract Mr. Darcy to herself, Miss Bingley is playing a lively Scotch air on the piano. The result, however, is the opposite of what she intends. It leads Darcy to draw near to Elizabeth and ask if she does not "feel a great inclination . . . to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel." Any kind of dancing would, of course, be inappropriate with Jane lying

sick upstairs, but the lively reel seems totally unconventional and suggests Darcy's inner desires.¹² Far more than his measured request for her hand under Sir William's tutelage, this approach to Elizabeth suggests strong attraction. Darcy is implying that they can cast off the measured forms of their society and unite in a lively dance. Elizabeth's pointed rejection of his request indicates her feelings perfectly. Although she smiles when she says it (as she invariably does when Darcy is by), she "does not want to dance a reel at all" (II, 52). Her resistance is inspired. That Miss Bingley reads the second volume to his first, wishes for a library like that at Pemberley, is enraptured by his sister's drawings, and is willing to sing to him, play for him, dance with him, walk with him, "mend his pen" for him, provokes only his driest wit. But Elizabeth's refusal to dance with him—like his earlier unwillingness to dance with her—heightens the tension between them.

Still another semimetaphoric measure of Darcy's attraction to Elizabeth can be found in the references to her eyes. For a man like Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet is both an attraction and a threat. She is free and lively, with the easy playfulness he lacks. His eye is satiric. It takes notice, but it does not react. Elizabeth's "pair of fine eyes," dark, sparkling and expressive, are not only quick to perceive but to communicate. "The faculty of vision," Richard Chase reminds us in another context, "is often identified in the unconscious with the energy of sex."¹³ Darcy cannot quite say, because he does not really know, what attracts him to Elizabeth. But part of the attraction is surely a sense of her vitality, of a freedom and ultimately of a sexual energy unknown in his formal and insipid circles that entices him against his judgment. It is for this reason that Elizabeth's eyes become an issue between him and Miss Bingley, who realizes, though she too is unconscious of its real origins, the source of her rival's power.

But Darcy's ambiguous attitude toward Elizabeth, which Miss Bingley considerably exaggerates for him, is more frequently expressed through motion than eyesight. As the novel shows, a sedate stroll through cultivated parklands or gardens or an accompanied walk to town, is an appropriate activity for a woman; but rapid, immoderate movement, especially when unescorted, is both alluring and perturbing. Hence, when in her walk from Longbourn to Netherfield to visit Jane, Elizabeth hikes over fields, jumps over stiles, and springs over puddles, her very energy in doing so at once heightens her value and renders her suspect in Darcy's eyes. He is "divided between admiration of the brilliance which exercise had given to her complexion and doubt as to the occasion's meriting her coming so far alone" (II, 33). It is only Miss Bingley's censoriousness about Eliza's muddy petticoats and "blowsy" hair—a word the

eighteenth century applied to beggars' trulls—that provokes Darcy to defend her. And even here he is ambivalent, certain he would not want his sister to “make such an exhibition of herself” (II, 36) and sure, as he later acknowledges, that he does not wish to be allied to a family that frequently makes a spectacle of itself.

But while Miss Bingley's unreasonable criticisms originate in jealousy rather than good judgment, Darcy's hesitations seem to echo Jane Austen's own ambivalences about the proper limits of female freedom. Without ever denying or rejecting her characters' energies, Jane Austen, in all her novels, tends to restrain the individual drives, particularly the sexual drives, within the confines of reasoned behavior and punishes those who too far exceed its limits. To do so, she uses movement symbolically. Thus, Mary Crawford's unregulated delight in horseback riding, Marianne Dashwood's impetuous running downhill, Louisa Hayter's leap from the Cobb, in two cases out of three, lead to a literal misstep and fall, and, in all three cases, to the young ladies' disappointment and defeat. As Sir John Middleton reminds us after Marianne's stumble in *Sense and Sensibility*, such “tumbling about”—and the word had the same sexual connotation in Jane Austen's time that it has now—is no way to get a proper husband (I, 44, 45).

The conflict between Darcy and Elizabeth that propels the first half of the novel is thus, as has often been seen, a very basic conflict in values. It is an opposition of heart and head, of control and spontaneity, of elitism and egalitarianism. As Samuel Kliger aptly sums it up, it is the contrast between art and nature.¹⁴ Many of the differences between the hero and the heroine represent attitudes originating in class—the landed proprietor's view versus the outlook of a gentleman's daughter. But the more fundamental differences are based on sex, with the hero and heroine embodying in dramatic form what the eighteenth century thought to be intrinsic distinctions between male and female temperaments. As Hannah More's antithetical portrait of the sexes, written in the late eighteenth century, shows, Elizabeth and Darcy are not just one man and one woman. They are representative sexual types:

Women have generally quicker perceptions; men have juster sentiments. Women consider how things may be prettily said; men, how they may be properly said. In women (young ones at least), speaking accompanies and sometimes precedes reflection; in men, reflection is the antecedent. Women speak to shine or to please; men, to convince or confute. Women admire what is brilliant; men, what is solid. Women prefer an extemporaneous sally of wit, or a sparkling effusion of fancy, before the most accurate reasoning, or the most laborious investigation of facts. In literary composition, women are pleased

with point, turn, and antithesis; men, with observation and a just deduction of effects from their causes. Women are fond of incident; men, of argument. Women admire passionately; men approve cautiously. One sex will think it betrays a want of feeling to be moderate in their applause; the other will be afraid of exposing a want of judgment by being in raptures with anything. Men refuse to give way to the emotions they actually feel, while women sometimes affect to be transported beyond what the occasion will justify.¹⁵

Darcy's containment, his distrust of "raptures," his self-proclaimed caution in forming his implacable judgments, all show how apt the description is for him. The feminine attributes of quickness, brilliance, spontaneity and sprightliness seem equally applicable to Elizabeth. As Lionel Trilling states, the conflict in the novel and its ultimate resolution center upon "her female vivacity" and "his strict male syntax."¹⁶

All the differences between Elizabeth and Darcy come to a focus in the proposal scene at Rosings, which is the pivotal episode of the book. Overtly, the dialogue focuses upon the social differences between them, with Darcy insisting on his social superiority, while Elizabeth argues that it is behavior, not rank, that makes the gentleman. But their overt discussions mirror an even more basic conflict. Also in conflict before them are the issues of superiority between male and female, with Darcy aggressively urging the claims of his male superiority, while Elizabeth acts out a traditionally defensive female role. The conventions of Jane Austen's fiction no longer allow the hero to assault the heroine physically, as Squire B. could do; but there is no doubt of his emotions toward this clever Pamela. The agitation of his manner and the charged energy of his speech—"In vain have I struggled. It will not do"—suggest a passion and a desire for possession that are almost palpable. Faced with an emotion that she does not yet desire, Elizabeth, like most fictional heroines, can only live by her wits. In a series of angry thrusts, brilliantly directed at his deep-held pretensions to fairness and honor, she wards off what can perhaps be seen as a verbal rape. Her final statement to Darcy that he has not behaved in a "gentlemanlike manner" is far less explicit than Jane Eyre's assertion to Rochester that she has full as "much soul as [he], —and full as much heart." But it voices the same feminine complaint against the man who will not recognize her selfhood.

On one level, then, the scene is all Elizabeth's—a triumph of feminist wish-fulfillment, in which the most desirable of males is meant to stand abased. But Jane Austen's mind is in all ways balanced. Her novels not only reconcile the claims of rival social classes and value systems, but reconcile the antitheses and hostilities of the sexes as well—perhaps because she knows that, in the case of the sexes at least, the very attraction

and repulsion are often the signs and preludes of a deeper attraction. So it is that after the climactic oppositions of the proposal scene, the rest of the novel moves toward the redefinitions and readjustments of love. Darcy must move further because his faults have been greater; but Elizabeth, too, must change and must see Darcy, herself, and her family in a clearer, truer light. In describing the way in which Darcy and Elizabeth move toward one another both as individuals and as typically masculine and feminine protagonists, the novel uses the same techniques of language and gesture that it used in the earlier sections. However, walking rather than dancing becomes the chief metaphor of sexual relationship in this more sober second half, and Elizabeth is no longer smiling and teasing, but quiet and subdued.

As demonstrated through the walking metaphor, Elizabeth and Darcy literally cannot get together in the scenes before Pemberley. Coming upon Darcy and Miss Bingley in the paths at Netherfield, Elizabeth runs off gaily, saying she would spoil their picturesque grouping if she stayed with them. Discovering that Darcy takes the same rambles in the park at Rosings that she does, she tries to hint that she does not want to meet him. Even after the proposal scene, they walk at cross-purposes, like Shakespearean lovers in a wood, meeting only for a moment as he hands her his letter.

Only at Pemberley, when Elizabeth's attitudes are changing, do they finally walk together in what becomes a crucial scene. The whole Pemberley episode is a *tour de force* of perception and technique, in which the outward action is a metaphor of inward feeling. The brilliant ambiguity of Elizabeth's first response to Pemberley—"at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something"—has frequently been pointed out (II, 245). But the whole episode is described through a series of changing perspectives, each indicative of Elizabeth's growing insights. First there are the varying viewpoints of the approach to Pemberley—the ascent and descent with their broken views, and then the arrival at the house itself and a full retrospective panorama. Similarly, within the house there are fragmentary new glimpses into its master provided by his possessions, his portrait, and his housekeeper, and then the sudden view of the man himself as he unexpectedly materializes on the lawn. The deep blushes that spread over Darcy's and Elizabeth's cheeks when they meet are symptomatic of the awkwardness of their mutual attraction.

These points of view—his fixed, hers changing—are further symbolized by their walk through the park. Darcy has set out to meet her; she is his polestar and he steers by her. But for her the landscape is constantly shifting. Each turn in the walk, each rise or fall in the land, reveals to her new beauties and new insights until another twist of the path reveals Mr. Darcy himself, deliberately coming toward her. As they walk

on together, their manner is sober—no smiles, no sparkle of wit, no repartee. Beatrice and Benedict are silent at last. But it is the silence of those who feel deeply.

The implications of silence and walking together are again explored in the second proposal scene at Longbourn. For a number of critics, this scene, like the proposal scenes in all her novels, is simply a frigid exercise in plot resolution, whose reticences are a sign she cannot handle sex. But this is far from true. As always, language and gesture tell an unspoken story, though here it is largely the language of speechlessness that she employs. We have only to look at Darcy's shift in pronouns from "I" to "you" (from "In vain have I struggled" to "You are too generous to trifle with me") to realize how far he has come in transcending his social and sexual egocentricity. And we have only to listen to Elizabeth, suddenly fumbling for words, to see how far she, too, has outgrown her old self. Jane Austen deliberately chooses to give Elizabeth's response in indirect discourse only, as if her confusion and intensity of feeling are beyond mere statement. Darcy's reaction, too, is given by indirection. He expresses himself, we are told, "as sensibly and warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do" (II, 366). But once again we can only guess at and supply from our own imaginations the potency and force of his feelings. They are too strong and too private for our hearing. Only his eyes, mentioned for almost the first time, tell all. They are suffused with "heartfelt delight." Fully alive at last, Darcy is no longer constrained within the rigidities of convention. He is free to ramble through the lanes with an Elizabeth only too glad to walk with him.

That there are ironies in this passage, that the chapter ends with Elizabeth's deciding that it is still too early to tease him, and that the next one begins with her claiming that it was his beautiful estate at Pemberley that made her love him, do not indicate that Jane Austen underestimated the force of sexual attraction—only that she understood the complexity of human relationships. Indeed, the last paragraphs of the book, which tell us little about Darcy and Elizabeth and a great deal about their various relatives, remind us that their love story can only fully be read in the context of the other couples around them: Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Bingley and Jane, Lydia and Wickham, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, and the still-unmarried Georgiana.

If Mr. Bennet's marital disappointment in his silly wife shows us what happens when a person of lively talents fails to choose an equal mate, the marriage of Bingley and Jane illustrates the pleasures of wedlock between two people of no particular talents at all. Neither polar opposites nor exceptional people, they serve as foils to Elizabeth and Darcy. The obstacles to their marriage are purely external and the very ease with which this man and woman melt into one another points up

the high degree of energy involved in the male-female fusion of Elizabeth and Darcy. The Bingleys' ductile metal strikes no sparks.

More interesting in their role as a normative couple are the Gardiners. The very last sentences of the book are dedicated to them: "With the Gardiners they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy, as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude toward the persons who, by bringing them into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them" (II, 388). That Darcy's acceptance of the Gardiners stands for his recognition of a rising social class and for a broadened humanitarianism has often been noted. But the Gardiners are more than social indices; they represent sexual norms as well. Where Elizabeth's parents illustrate the possible future miseries of marriage, the Gardiners and their children suggest its promises. Can one doubt that they are comfortably wedded? Their constant conjectures about Elizabeth and Darcy suggest intimate bedtime conversation, and their slow arm-in-arm walk at Pemberley (arranged to allow Elizabeth time to be with Darcy) implies a tacit understanding of their common aims. They are actually surrogate parents to both Elizabeth and Darcy. Their highly practical and highly principled handling of Lydia's elopement sets a standard for warmth and firmness that Elizabeth and Darcy must learn to combine before they marry.

Georgiana Darcy, one of the few unwed characters at the end of the novel, serves as a foil to Lydia and as a further illustration of Jane Austen's attitude toward sex. Shy and restrained though she is, Georgiana is in many ways Lydia Bennet's double. Both girls are almost the same age at the period of their involvement with Wickham. Georgiana was fifteen when she planned to elope; Lydia had just turned sixteen when she married. Georgiana was nearly seduced from one seaside resort; Lydia ran away from another at Brighton. Each had an inadequate chaperone and both, significantly enough, were physically precocious. In an age when puberty arrived later than it does now, the fifteen-year-old Lydia is repeatedly described as "stout" and "well-grown," and Miss Darcy, too, has a well-formed figure. That both of them can fall prey to a man like Wickham is a sign not only that Jane Austen recognizes the temptations of the flesh but that she sees the equal dangers of a too repressive or too permissive upbringing, each of which equally may lead to sexual promiscuity. As in all things, it is the mean between feeling and reason that must be observed. The obstreperous Lydia is as unsuccessful an example of one kind of upbringing as the agonizingly shy Georgiana is of another. They represent the extremes to which Darcy's and Elizabeth's families are prone.

If Lydia's fate seems fixed by the end of the novel, there is the promise of a happier future for Georgiana. Immature enough to be considered

Elizabeth's and Darcy's child, she must be retrained by the lessons their own love has taught them. The next-to-last paragraph of the novel, which emphasizes the freedom and spontaneity Elizabeth will teach Georgiana, is a corrective to her too-rigid upbringing. Ideally, she will be a child of Darcy's head and Elizabeth's heart, of his principles and her feelings, or—to oversimplify—of the union of rationality and emotion that their marriage represents.

To say that Jane Austen's novels are essentially sexless—intellectual exercises devoid of sex or defensive about it—seems to me wrong. Her use of allusions, puns, riddles, and sex symbols points to a specific knowledge about the manifestations of sexuality—a knowledge traceable to her reading, if nothing else. Far from wondering, as one critic does, if she “knew anything of the part played by flesh and the fleshly passions,” we can only register surprise at her sophisticated devices for indicating them.¹⁷

But more significant than her knowledge of physical sex is the fully human way in which she implies the broad range of feelings that man and woman have for each other. All of her books underscore both the social and sexual meaning of marriage. A good marriage for Jane Austen is always supportive of the organization of society. It involves an appropriate mixing of classes and value systems that sustains the traditional qualities of English life while allowing for change and renewal. But marriage is also a sexual act in her novels—usually a reconciliation between a man and a woman whose inner feelings and conscious knowledge have been at odds throughout the story. As I have tried to show in my analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, the signs of such attraction may only be covert. But they ring true to the complexities of human emotion and to its intensities as well.

It may be argued that I have conjectured too much in interpreting these novels, that I have treated the characters as if they were living beings, whose words and gestures we can interpret and whose past and future we can guess. But this is surely what we are meant to do. Jane Austen herself went looking for Elizabeth's picture among the real portraits of an art exhibition—a symbol of the kind of involvement her fiction demands. Besides, the art of Jane Austen is an art of interstices—of lines finely drawn and space suggested. The unflagging delight of rereading her lies in our own increasing perception of those traits and motives that she merely suggests. One of the clearest suggestions is surely the subtleties of sexual relationship that lie behind the surface of convention and restraint.

NOTES

- 1 Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), pass.
- 2 Jane Austen, *Fragments of a Novel Written by Jane Austen, January-March, 1817* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1925), p. 108.
- 3 Henrietta ten Harmsel, *Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions, Studies in English Literature*, 4 (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), 126.
- 4 Jane Austen, *Novels*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923), I, 59. All subsequent citations are to the Chapman edition.
- 5 *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, ed. John Almon (London: W. Webb, 1786), II, 159. The riddle may also be found in the appendix to the Chapman edition of *Emma*.
- 6 *Slang and Its Analogues Past and Present*, ed. John S. Farmer (New York: Kraus Reprints, 1950), pass.
- 7 Compare, for example, *The Muse in Masquerade: Or, A Collection of Riddles Serious and Comic* (London, 1745) and *Frolics of the Sphinx: Or an Entirely Original Collection of Charades, Riddles, and Conundrums* (Oxford: Munday and Slatter, 1812).
- 8 Mudrick, pass. Kingsley Amis, "What Became of Jane Austen?" *The Spectator*, No. 6745 (4 Oct. 1957), 339-40.
- 9 Ann Banfield, "The Moral Landscape of *Mansfield Park*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 26 (June 1971), 21.
- 10 Tony Tanner, "Jane Austen and the Quiet Thing," *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pass. Gerald Gould, "The Gate Scene at Sotherton in *Mansfield Park*," *Literature and Psychology*, 20, No. 2 (1970), 76-78.
- 11 It has not to my knowledge been previously noted that Bingley's name and character both derive from Regina Maria Roche's novel, *The Children of the Abbey*, first published in 1796 and mentioned in *Emma* as one of the novels Harriet Smith admires, "[Charles] Bingley," said a gentleman after they had been some time at the table, 'you are certainly the most changeable fellow in the world.' " His rival in this novel, Lord Mortimer, in some ways resembles Mr. Darcy, although he is far less admirable. His speech beginning, "Left at an early age uncontrolled master of my actions," sounds very much like Darcy's confessions about his upbringing after the second proposal.
- 12 The word *reel* did have a sexual connotation in Jane Austen's time. The phrases "the reels o' Bogie," "the reels of Stumpie," and "dance the miller's reel" are all slang terms for sexual intercourse.
- 13 Richard Chase, "The Brontës: A Centennial Observance," *Kenyon Review*, 9 (Autumn 1947), 495.
- 14 Samuel Klinger, "Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*," in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Norton Critical edition (New York: Norton, 1970), pass.
- 15 Hannah More, *Complete Works* (New York: Harper, 1843), II, 335-36.
- 16 Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 222.
- 17 Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 102.

