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Author(s): D. J. Dooley

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Notes and Reviews

PRIDE, PREJUDICE, AND VANITY IN ELIZABETH BENNET

IN A NOTE ON "Elizabeth Bennet: Prejudice or Vanity?"¹ Robert C. Fox makes the somewhat plausible suggestion that, following the success of *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen may have dropped her earlier title *First Impressions* and adopted the title *Pride and Prejudice* for the sake of the antithesis and alliteration. It is rather surprising, however, to find him describing "pride and prejudice" as apparently a cliché in Jane Austen's time on the basis of the four occurrences mentioned in the communications to the *Times Literary Supplement* which he cites—one in Fanny Burney, one in Gibbon, and two in Jeremy Taylor a century earlier. Moreover, if he points to the danger of our being misled by investing the title with too much significance, we might very well point to the danger of not investing it with enough. Searching for some other characteristic besides prejudice to account for Elizabeth Bennet's behavior, he concludes that "The initial fault of each character is that pride in one and vanity in the other is indulged in to an obsessive degree." Surely a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* which would describe Elizabeth as obsessively vain is a curiously distorted one.

Employing Mary Bennet's distinction between pride and vanity in chapter v—"Pride relates to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us"—Fox decides that Elizabeth can be accused of vanity, because she is excessively concerned with what one person—Darcy—thinks of her. But surely this is to give *vanity* a strange meaning; Mary says that it *relates to* what we would like others to think of us, but it is not merely a concern with what others think. The discussion takes the turn it does because Charlotte Lucas shows a willingness to forgive Darcy his pride, since it is possible to have a just pride in one's abilities, accomplishments, and situation. Mary describes pride as a very common failing, and adds that "there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or the other, real or imaginary." Throughout the novel, there are few occasions on which Elizabeth behaves with excessive concern

¹ *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XVII (1962), 185–187.

for the opinions of others; she is even willing to risk their ridicule by telling the story of how Darcy snubbed her at the dance. On the other hand, she does manifest the self-complacency to which Mary alludes; she has a nearly justifiable pride in her good sense; this complacency, of course, is to receive a rude shock when she is made to realize how prejudiced she has been toward Darcy: “‘How despicably have I acted!’ she cried; ‘I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! . . .’” The word *vanity* is used twice in the paragraph, but in neither case is it with Mary’s meaning. While priding herself on her discernment, Elizabeth has been guilty of prejudice.

Fox argues that Elizabeth’s reaction to Darcy is not properly speaking one of prejudice, since she has good reasons for her opinion of him. But with considerable artistry Jane Austen shows how Elizabeth loses some of her power of discrimination in her judgments on Darcy. In the bouts of wit at Netherfield, she has the opportunity to see how alike she and Darcy are in their responses to people and ideas; yet she cannot attribute any liberality of spirit to him. There is a subtle touch toward the end of chap. xi, where once again pride and vanity are under discussion; Darcy gives an explanation of pride quite similar to that given earlier by Charlotte, and Elizabeth turns away to hide a smile: she has made up her mind that he is excessively proud and will not revise her opinion. Immediately after, she ignores the first of several pointed remarks which Darcy makes concerning her bias against him; when she says that his defect is to hate everybody, it is his turn to be amused: “‘And yours,’ he replied with a smile, ‘is wilfully to misunderstand them.’”

When Elizabeth is taken in by the handsome and charming Wickham, Fox admits that prejudice is present, but considers that it is only superficial and temporary. But we should notice how quick Elizabeth is to punctuate his story with exclamations about Darcy’s abominable pride, how willing she is to hear him abused, and how she accepts the story without corroborative evidence. Perhaps she has some grounds for mistrusting Miss Bingley’s warning against Wickham and for dismissing the account which Jane has received from Bingley, but the warmth with which she replies to Jane indicates how unwilling she is to consider that there may be two sides to the story. At the Netherfield ball, when she is surprised into accepting Darcy’s invitation to dance and Charlotte

consoles her by saying, "I dare say you will find him very agreeable," she replies, "'Heaven forbid! *That* would be the greatest misfortune of all! To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate! . . .'" The remark is not entirely in jest, and when Darcy pleads with her shortly after not to be too quick to sketch his character, "as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either," she is not prepared to listen to his warning.

The story proceeds much as Margaret Kennedy describes it:

It is only to Darcy that she cannot be just, cannot be gentle. Her animus against him has been fed by too many tributary streams. The original slight to herself might quickly have been forgotten. . . . But then upon the scene appear the attractive Wickham and the fantastic Collins, both of them protégés of the Darcy family, and each with his particular contribution to the prejudiced picture which is forming in her mind. She contrasts the fawning servility which has recommended Collins to a good living with the sturdy independence which has, by his own account, deprived Wickham of similar advancement. Darcy's active participation in the separation of Jane and Bingley follows. And her contempt for the whole arrogant set reaches its climax when she goes to Hunsford and meets Lady Catherine de Bourgh. . . .²

Again she is given opportunities to exercise the necessary discrimination, as when Lady Catherine behaves with patrician arrogance in chap. xxxi and Darcy looks ashamed of her. In the scenes at Hunsford, her original bias against Darcy leads her to disclaim his compliments, interpret his visits on the ground that he has nothing better to do, and attribute their meetings in the park to mischance. It is because of her persistence in a prejudiced view that his proposal comes as a tremendous shock to her. After she has read his long letter of explanation, she reproaches herself for being "blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd." And finally, in chap. lviii, when the two of them confess their faults to each other, she tells him how through his letter "gradually all her former prejudices had been removed."

When Mary makes her distinction between vanity and pride, Jane Austen makes the ironic comment that she "piqued herself on the solidity of her reflections. . . ." Mary's definition of vanity does

² Margaret Kennedy, *Jane Austen* (London, 1957), p. 58.

not seem to be Jane Austen's; in chap. lii, when she has learned from her aunt of Darcy's magnanimous intervention in the Lydia-Wickham affair, hope rises in Elizabeth's heart: "But it was a hope shortly checked by other considerations, and she soon felt that even her vanity was insufficient, when required to depend on his affection for her. . . ." It is clear that *vanity* here applies, not to the impression Elizabeth wants to make on others, but to her own opinion of herself. *Pride and Prejudice* as a title carries a great deal of meaning; *Pride and Vanity* simply would not do.

D. J. DOOLEY

St. Michael's College
University of Toronto

Moby Dick: CHAPTER CXXIX, "THE CABIN"

Counterpoised opposite the whiteness of the self-reflecting whale which sucks Captain Ahab into his egocentric doom is the blackness of the love-thirsty cabin boy whose very weakness might have saved the captain of the Pequod by playing out the excess of his self-destroying strength. Pip figures significantly throughout much of *Moby Dick* but perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in the "eight-inch" chapter titled "The Cabin" (cxxix). In many respects this chapter is a high point in the tragedy of Ahab; though brief, it involves a crucial emotional turning for the mad pursuer of the White Whale. Pip's is one of the last human hands held out to him; the Negro lad's heart is one of the last pathetically needing his love and protection. Had Ahab surrendered to this relationship, the ageless tendons of fatherhood still growing deep down in the sea of all he rebelled against would have somehow anchored him to humanity and have been his salvation.

But Ahab rejects Pip. "Lad, I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health." Gentle, passive Pip catching Ahab by the hand pulls hard on the human being—mute but not dead—suffocating within the monomaniac. Both Ahab and the boy are mad, but Pip is utterly generous and self-sacrificing in his insanity. "No, ye have not a whole body, Sir; do ye but use poor me for your one lost leg; only tread