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Resolving the Institution of Marriage in Eighteenth-Century Courtship Novels

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“You are then resolved to have him?” Lady Catherine De Bourgh haughtily demands of Elizabeth Bennet as they stand in a “prettyish kind of a little wilderness” outside Longbourne (Austen 338, 333). Elizabeth, not one to be thwarted, firmly replies, “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (338). With an indignant, “And this is your real opinion! This is your final resolve!” and a few other unpleasant words, Lady Catherine “refuses to return into the house,” leaving Elizabeth to “wal[k] quietly into it herself” (339).

Two features of this famous exchange in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* are particularly significant: its treatment of marriage, and its use of the word “resolve.” Here we see that Jane Austen’s portrayal of courtship differs from that of many courtship novels written throughout the eighteenth century: in Austen’s novels, instead of submitting to authority and convention, a young woman takes charge of her own marriage. More importantly, however, Lady Catherine and Elizabeth debate this important issue through the language of “resolve.” Indeed, why does “resolve” appear at such a crucial moment in such a crucial courtship novel? I argue that it is because “resolve” is a much more important trope than we have yet acknowledged. For years literary study has tracked and analyzed patterns of language in eighteenth-century novels. With the help of various critics, we have come to think of certain tropes, such as “sensibility,” “reform,” “improvement,” “virtue,” “adventure,” and “duty,” to name a few, as central to our understanding of the eighteenth-century novel. I propose “resolve” as a trope of similar importance to the eighteenth-century novel after tracing its importance primarily in the development of the courtship novel (which culminates, shall we say, with the works of Austen) and that subgenre’s commentary on the institution of marriage.

The language of “resolve” is significant in courtship novels because of its prevalence in the discourse of many branches of eighteenth-century society. Resolves and the practice of resolving were culturally important: announced in the *House of Commons Journal*, encouraged by various ministers’ sermons, and

reported in business-related articles in *The Times*. Furthermore, J.J. Colledge's *Ships of the Royal Navy* lists six vessels christened Resolution in the eighteenth century. Clearly the resolves of courtship novels are echoing a general cultural concern with the practice of resolving. And there are many, many echoes. "Resolve" and its cognates "resolute," "resolutely," and "resolution" appear again and again throughout the courtship novel. For example, in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1741), the word appears over 125 times, and in *Clarissa* (1747-48), over 500 times. Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) uses resolve 148 times, and later in the century, resolve appears in Gothic-influenced courtship novels such as Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788) with 135 uses and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) with 89. "Resolve" is also important in Austen, appearing at least 25 times in each of her novels and about 50 times on average. Finally, it is interesting to note that though the heyday of resolve begins in the eighteenth century, it is still very prominent in the courtship plots of nineteenth-century novels: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847, 58 uses), Anthony Trollope's *Small House at Allington* (1864, 97 uses), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72, 112 uses) are representative rather than singular examples.

Interestingly, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century definitions of the word "resolve" found in the *OED* are numerous, and, to a certain extent, contradictory. Simultaneously to "reconcile" and to "dissolve," to "determine" and to "disintegrate," "resolve," in the eighteenth century at least, is a paradox of language that allows for, indeed helps to induce, the well-known and much commented upon paradox of courtship novels: voluntary submission. Furthermore, a "resolve" suggests a multiplicity of choices that, through individual effort, is worked into a single course of action: one choice is preferred while many are discarded. Thus, Austen (and others) can use this language to empower their heroines while still emphasizing the sacrifice—the potential dissolution and disintegration of identity—that lurks behind every resolve. Austen's heroines "reconcile" themselves to marriage but attempt to "dissolve" the cultural singularity of that institution; they "determine" to marry but simultaneously maintain a certain degree of "disintegration," of unique self or identity, within that marriage.

The repeated use of resolve we hear in the dialogue between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine represents a culmination of many decades of use of the language of "resolve" in crucial moments of courtship plots. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, resolve figured prominently and significantly in the precursors of courtship novels, amatory fictions, in which "lovers are opposed in general by a world of financial and sexual materialism which reduces love to a biological impulse and marriage to a profitable alliance" (Richetti 259). Eliza Haywood's

The Rash Resolve: Or, The Untimely Discovery (1724), is an excellent example of an amatory fiction that uses resolve to warn young women of the dangers of facing the temptations of that “financial and sexual materialism” as a single woman. In *The Rash Resolve*, Emanuella, a young woman, becomes an orphan, is betrayed by her best friend, has an illegitimate child with her lover Emilius who marries another woman, and dies a tragic death at the novel’s close. These consequences, the first paragraph of the novel explains, are due to Emanuella’s misdirected “Firmness of Resolution” (1-2). Amatory fictions urged young women to resolve to marry by illustrating the consequences of the alternative.

As we know, these amatory fictions gradually evolved into courtship novels, and as we also know, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* serves as an excellent example of a bridge between the two. As Katherine Sobba Green notes in her work from the early 1990s, *The Courtship Novel: 1740-1820*, *Pamela* retains the “preoccupation with sexual pursuit” of the amatory fiction while following the courtship and marriage plot—a marriageable young woman overcomes obstacles to obtain a felicitous marriage (Green 142). *Pamela* and succeeding courtship novels differ from amatory fictions in that they are no longer cautionary tales, but they are similar in that they continue to encourage young women to (properly) give up their singularity and marry. Indeed, as Nancy Armstrong argues, many courtship novels, echoing conduct manuals, strive to represent “normal behavior” and guide young women to marriage (24). While heroines of amatory fictions meet their doom because of bad resolutions, the heroines of courtship novels are “rewarded” for their good ones. Indeed it is because *Pamela* is “so resolute” (22) that she eventually reforms and marries Mr. B.

Another modulation of the courtship novel can be found in late eighteenth-century Gothic novels, many of which have, or at least contain elements of, a courtship plot. Here we also see another shift in the use of “resolve.” In Anne Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, we follow Valancourt’s trying courtship of Emily St. Aubert. Emily, rather than making resolutions in favor of marriage, frequently and painfully resolves against it: she refuses Valancourt’s proposal of a clandestine marriage, “resolv[ing] to endure a present, rather than provoke a distant misfortune” (155). She also makes “resolute resistance” to Count Morano’s repeated marriage proposals (225), and at the end of the novel, acting on Count De Villefort’s advice, “she resolve[s]” to refuse Valancourt’s suit yet again (519). Though Emily and Valancourt do eventually marry, it is only after Emily spends a significant amount of time suffering as she keeps her painful resolve to wait for a marriage acceptable to both herself and society. While earlier courtship novels like *Pamela* narrate women’s ability to make resolutions that lead to a happy marriage, the Gothic novels, perhaps

more realistically, emphasize that women's position in relation to marriage is actually one of significantly little power—Emily can only resolve to refuse the unacceptable and wait for something better, and she defines what is unacceptable according to the dictates of society rather than those of her own mind.

Jane Austen will build upon Radcliffe's treatment of resolve and will suggest the possibility of a somewhat more self-directed and self-centered power for women. Beginning with *Northanger Abbey* (1818), her first written but posthumously published novel that makes use of and sometimes playfully mocks Gothic conventions, Austen reiterates the language of resolve in order to advocate female independence in marriage, thus employing what Luce Irigaray calls "mimicry," which is to "assume the feminine role deliberately" and use "playful repetition" to "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (124). Austen will playfully, deliberately, and subversively repeat the language of resolve, traditionally deployed to encourage submission in marriage, in order to convert marriage into affirmation of female power.

Catherine Moreland, for example, heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, is a single young woman who will mimic the language of resolve in order to choose her own marriage. The oldest child in a large family without wealth, Catherine travels with her neighbors the Allens to Bath. There she befriends the dishonest and self-serving siblings Isabella and John Thorpe and begins her relationship with Henry Tilney. Catherine demonstrates her ability to take charge of her own courtship through her resolutions, making a "first resolution" that "continue[s] in full force" to seek Henry's sister Eleanor (81, 90). Catherine's resolutions to acquaint herself with Miss Tilney are in reality advances toward Henry, and though they might resemble resolutions in favor of the accepted institution of marriage, Catherine's "resolutions" of "good sense" (198) are in fact more affirmative than subordinate. Rather than consulting society—perhaps incarnated by her false friend Isabella—Catherine prefers Mr. Tilney and ignores the proposal of the egocentric Mr. Thorpe. Like Radcliffe's Emily St. Aubert, Catherine chooses to wait until marriage is acceptable, but unlike Emily, Catherine makes her own choice.

Elinor, one of the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen's first novel published during her lifetime, also uses resolve to make her own choice. Though impoverished by the death of her father, Elinor soon begins a relationship with Edward Ferrars, who, Elinor is disappointed to learn, has been secretly engaged to Lucy Steele for several years. Austen, again employing mimicry, gives Elinor the language of resolve, but makes her resolves affirmative rather than subordinate. Elinor is resolve itself. She continuously "resolv[es] to regulate her behaviour" in the face of various social obstacles, including Lucy's spiteful triumph, Mrs. Ferrars'

rudeness, and Edward's own awkwardness (88). Elinor's resolve is evidence of her defiance of society and assertion that she is not dependent on its definition of marriage: she is resolved to remain a composed, intelligent, and *single* woman until she can have marriage her own way.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen turns from resolution in mind to resolution in deed. The importance of resolute actions is made explicit in the novel through Elizabeth and Darcy's argument over Mr. Bingley's propensity to quite easily "change a resolution" (49). Elizabeth herself begins the novel with resolutions that need changing, believing Wickham's account of Darcy's treachery and therefore "resolv[ing] against any sort of conversation" with the latter (88). Elizabeth makes another rash judgment when she reads Mr. Darcy's post-proposal letter: "His belief of her sister's insensibility, she instantly resolved to be false" (198). Later, however, Elizabeth's resolves drastically change and she cries, "Till this moment, I never knew myself" (202). The new Elizabeth makes new resolutions that carry her through her meeting with Darcy at Pemberley and the battle with Lady Catherine previously quoted. Elizabeth's "desperate resolution" to thank Mr. Darcy for his help with Lydia elicits a second marriage proposal, and this time Elizabeth "resolve[s] on having him" (345, 360, 356). Though Elizabeth has to acquire the affirmative resolve Elinor Dashwood seems inherently to possess, Elizabeth too resolves first herself and then her marriage.

In *Mansfield Park* (1814), Austen further examines how personality affects a woman's resolution to marry. Fanny Price, raised by her uncle Sir Bertram and in love with her cousin Edmund, remains resolute in spite of unrequited love and pressure to marry a man she often dislikes and disrespects. She resolves to find happiness within herself. It's true that Fanny will sometimes pursue Edmund—for example, she "resolve[s]" to search for him and his beloved Mary Crawford when they abandon her at Southerton (126)—but she refuses to rely on a return of his love. When pained by his flirtatious conversation with Miss Crawford, Fanny "resolve[s] on going home immediately" rather than remaining "quite unable to attend as she ought" (229). Fanny often resolves against one desire—her love for Edmund—in favor of another that is even more important to her, what she calls "self-government" (274). Fanny consistently refuses to let herself be anything other than what she most wants to be: good, pious, and "rational" (274). Fanny's resolute relationship with herself is more important than her relationship with Edmund because, for Austen, female "self" and resolve are more important than marriage.

Austen makes an unexpected shift in her next novel, *Emma* (1816), treating her own process of mimicry lightly and humorously. In *Emma*, the wealthy heroine isn't resolute, but strangely, she isn't the worse for that. Emma makes "resolutions"

never to paint another portrait, never to make another match, and never to marry, each of which she breaks (28, 89, 133). Though Elizabeth Bennett also begins with resolutions to be broken, what is peculiar about Emma is that her reformed resolutions seem no more permanent than the original ones. Indeed, near the end of the novel we read: "Serious she was, very serious, in her thankfulness and in her resolutions; and yet there was no preventing a laugh, sometimes in the very midst of them" (313). Emma uses resolve to both avoid marriage and then to obtain it when it suits her, and her laughter suggests that one can be happy even with light-hearted, somewhat fickle resolves. Austen is, in a way, mocking her own mimicry of resolve, perhaps because resolve is more important to the single woman struggling for power than the single woman who, like Emma, already commands a household and even a neighborhood.

In *Persuasion* (1818), published posthumously, Austen again takes a more serious approach to resolve, celebrating a mature resolve that, again, finds joy in self and only enters a marriage when that joy will not be compromised. Anne Elliot, least favorite daughter of the conceited Sir Elliot and slighted sister of the haughty Elinor Elliot and suffering Mary Musgrove, resolves to marry Captain Wentworth, a man she was persuaded to jilt in her youth, or no one at all. Though Anne seems *irresolute* to her beloved, especially when compared to the "so resolute!" Louisa Musgrove, eventually Anne's "resolution of a collected mind" reminds Wentworth that he dearly loves her (97, 195). That same resolution of mind allows Anne to be of service to everyone around her and to find happiness both in her single self and in her marriage.

Although the prevalence of resolve decreases in the nineteenth-century novel, perhaps because of a more established awareness and acceptance of the individual, we continue to hear echoes of Austen-like resolve, as in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for example, when Jane rejects her cousin St. John's proposal of marriage by firmly stating, "I adhere to my resolution" (459). Austen's successful mimicry of resolve in courtship allows succeeding authors to explore more drastic reformations of marriage and female identity.

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