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Excerpt

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## I

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## Narrative

One of several clever effects in the famous first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* – ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife’ (*P&P*, p. 3) – is the uncertainty arising about the nature and authority of the statement made. Whose voice and views are we listening to here, what status or value should we grant them, and what does Jane Austen think? In its confident declarative style, the novel’s opening seems to promise uncomplicated access to authorial opinion, and adopts a formula that had been used for decades to mark moments of emphasis and assertion in polemical writing. ‘It is a Truth universally acknowledged,’ insists John Shebbeare in a political pamphlet of 1756, ‘that *Canada* is the only part [of France’s overseas dominions] which can afford these Requisites.’ Or again, declares Anna Laetitia Barbauld in a religious tract of 1792, that prayer for advantages such as health may be impious ‘is a truth . . . universally acknowledged by all Christians’.<sup>1</sup> This is personal conviction in loud mode, rhetorically inflated into absolute truth. In practice readers might dispute this truth – readers such as the officials who were shortly to prosecute Shebbeare for seditious libel, or the clerics who thought Barbauld fanatical and superstitious – but the author’s investment in it is impossible to mistake.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, by contrast, the same grandiose, generalising formulation is punctured by the shallowness and parochialism of the point that follows. For there is nothing even plausibly universal about this particular ‘truth’, and in another time or place the single man in question might just as well be in want of a hard-nosed accountant, a commitment-free fling, or a same-sex civil union. The timeless present-tense mode notwithstanding, Austen is telling us not about universal truth at all, but about a socially and

<sup>1</sup> John Shebbeare, *A First Letter to the People of England* (1756), p. 41; Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *Remarks on Mr. Gilbert Wakefield’s Enquiry* (1792), p. 16.

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historically specific set of attitudes.<sup>2</sup> In ways made inescapable as the novel unfolds, her words go on to suggest not reliable authorial truth-telling – the wise, supervising commentary that might guide readers through the moral complexities of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, or even the interpretative mine-field of Fielding’s *Tom Jones* – but satirical invocation of a communal voice. They conjure up the shared perspective of genteel home-counties society or ‘the minds of the surrounding families’ (*P&P*, p. 3), and they mimic the thought and language of this society – diminished thought and impoverished language in which the petty, self-interested assumptions of Mrs Bennet and her neighbours are casually dignified into something more. A masterstroke of comic bathos and teasing plot anticipation, the trick also foreshadows the clever intricacies, strategic indeterminacies and subtle, agile ventriloquisms of the narrative to follow.

### Epistolarity

A standard explanation for Austen’s virtuoso handling of narrative voice in *Pride and Prejudice* and the work most closely associated with it, *Sense and Sensibility*, is that key features of her technique originate in the tradition of epistolary fiction. More than a century before Austen first drafted both novels in the 1790s, pioneering works such as Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–7) were using fictional letters to suggest direct access to the consciousness and viewpoint of their protagonists, and classic eighteenth-century instances of the mode include Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778) and Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782). Two of the best-known phrases employed by Richardson to describe his narrative practice, ‘writing, to the moment’ and ‘writing from the heart’,<sup>3</sup> catch the special properties of immediacy and intimacy associated with the epistolary form: first, its dramatic synchronisation of story and discourse, with narrators responding to events as they unfold; second, the revelatory character of familiar letters, addressed to friends or family members in a spirit of unguarded spontaneity. Yet in Richardson’s hands the novel in letters also gives rise to more destabilising effects than these conventions suggest, above all in his multi-voiced masterpiece *Clarissa* (1747–8), where adversarial accounts of the central conflict – its causes and effects, its rights and wrongs – are put forward by competing narrators. In *Les Liaisons*

<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, Austen may owe this move to the eighteenth century’s foremost dealer in universal truths, Samuel Johnson, whose narrator in a satirical *Rambler* essay (No. 115, 23 April 1751) ‘was known to possess a fortune, and to want a wife’.

<sup>3</sup> John Carroll (ed.), *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 289; Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, 3rd edn, 8 vols. (1751), vol. IV, p. 269.

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*dangereuses*, the letter becomes a vehicle not of privileged, reliably transmitted information, but instead of deception and betrayal. Laclos's novel dramatises a struggle for power – a war, one narrator finally calls it – that plays out in the epistolary medium itself.

By 1787, the year to which the earliest of Jane Austen's surviving juvenilia are normally dated, fully half the new novels published in English were narrated in letters.<sup>4</sup> The statistical evidence masks a creative decline, however, and with a few exceptions there was little more to the epistolary novels that now crowded the market than vapid, lumbering imitation of Richardson's last and for a time most influential work, his voluminous novel of manners *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4). Early fragments and skits by Austen such as 'Love and Freindship', 'Lesley Castle' and 'A Collection of Letters' deftly mock the sentimental excesses and creaking mechanics of this persistent strain of circulating-library fiction, but Austen's admiration for the towering prototype is impossible to miss. Family memoirs report her absorption in the circumstantial detail and meticulous characterisation of *Sir Charles Grandison*, and for James Edward Austen Leigh '[h]er knowledge of Richardson's works was such as no one is likely again to acquire . . . all that was ever said or done in the cedar parlour, was familiar to her'.<sup>5</sup> In this context, *Pride and Prejudice* has been interpreted as a creative reworking of elements originating in *Sir Charles Grandison*, albeit a reworking that 'substitutes density and relation for the diffuseness of Richardson'.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of the scandalous Laclos is less often asserted, and would certainly have been denied by the earliest custodians of Austen's reputation. But in her longest surviving exercise in epistolary fiction, 'Lady Susan' (perhaps written as early as 1794, though other dates have been proposed), Austen is fascinated by letters as agents of duplicity and manipulation, not as vehicles of documentary realism or tokens of psychological introspection. Daringly, 'Lady Susan' entrusts much of its text to a narrator characterised above all by her ability to beguile, and to beguile specifically as a letter-writer, exerting 'a happy command of Language, which is too often used . . . to make Black appear White' (*LM*, pp. 11–12). Rather than describe the 'captivating Deceit' (p. 9) of this character in secure, objective narration, 'Lady Susan' exposes readers directly to it in the hazardous medium of her writing,

<sup>4</sup> Discounting translations, forty-seven new novels were published in Britain and Ireland in 1787, of which twenty-four were epistolary. See Peter Garside, James Raven, et al., *The English Novel, 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 390–415.

<sup>5</sup> J. E. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 71 (see also p. 141).

<sup>6</sup> Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 84.

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unassisted – until a short but significant third-person ‘Conclusion’ – by the guidance of a detached voice. The work becomes a minor masterpiece of epistolarity in the sense of the term established by Janet Altman: ‘the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning’.<sup>7</sup>

Other manuscripts from this early period of Austen’s creativity do not survive, or survive only in the shape of radical later transformations. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*, published respectively in 1813, 1811 and 1817, all have their origins in drafts composed by Austen in her early twenties, and beyond their working titles (‘First Impressions’, ‘Elinor and Marianne’, ‘Susan’) little is known for certain about these drafts. It is widely accepted, however, that at least one of them was epistolary in form. ‘Memory is treacherous’, confessed Austen’s niece Caroline in 1869, ‘but I cannot be mistaken in saying that *Sense and Sensibility* was *first* written in letters – & so read to her family.’<sup>8</sup> Yet the residually epistolary component of *Sense and Sensibility* is by no means pronounced, and recalcitrant features of this work (notably the inseparability of Elinor and Marianne for most of the action, and the absence of eligible confidantes elsewhere) make it hard to detect the trace of a novel in letters. Some scholars have suggested instead – memory being treacherous indeed, and in this case bound up with hearsay, since Caroline Austen was not born until 1805 – that a better candidate for epistolary origins is *Pride and Prejudice*, which turns on letters as vehicles of narrative or agents of plot at several crucial junctures, and contains almost five times as much verbatim epistolary text as *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>9</sup> One need only remember Mr Collins’s toe-curling letters of self-introduction and faux-consolation to Mr Bennet, the pivotal account of himself that Darcy hands Elizabeth in the grove near Rosings, or the epistolary mediation of the Lydia–Wickham subplot in Volume III, to see how central letters are to the comic and dramatic effects of *Pride and Prejudice*, and especially to the dynamics of self-revelation, delayed disclosure and ongoing assessment of character and action that animate the work. Tantalising external evidence strengthens the case for an epistolary prototype. It may be relevant that when offering the manuscript to the bookseller Thomas Cadell in 1797, Austen’s father compared it to Burney’s *Evelina*, specifically with reference to length – length from which, Austen

<sup>7</sup> Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Austen-Leigh, *Memoir*, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> D. W. Harding, ‘The Supposed Letter Form of *Sense and Sensibility*’, *Notes and Queries* 40 (1993), pp. 464–6; Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 114–15, 124–9.

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later wrote, the more streamlined *Pride and Prejudice* was ‘lopt & cropt’ – but perhaps also with Burney’s epistolary form in mind.<sup>10</sup>

That said, Burney makes only limited use in *Evelina* of the rich resources of epistolary polyphony pioneered by Richardson and others, and her typical heading for each narrative letter, designed mainly to externalise the maturing consciousness of her heroine, is ‘Evelina in continuation’. *Pride and Prejudice* exhibits instead a finely calibrated range of epistolary voices, voices that shift according to situation and addressee as well as from writer to writer. At first sight Austen might seem to achieve this effect within the basic conventions of epistolary immediacy, using letters as transparent windows on authentic inner lives. It is the unguarded, unpremeditated openness of Bingley’s epistolary manner – ‘rapidity of thought and carelessness of execution’ (*P&P*, p. 53) – that is emphasised in an early chapter, and writing from the heart is always the governing assumption with guileless Jane, as when she communicates the experience of being snubbed by the Bingleys in a letter included, we are frankly told, to ‘prove what she felt’ (p. 167). Even in these apparently straightforward cases, however, letters cannot be taken at face value, with Bingley’s vaunted artlessness challenged by Darcy as a pose, and Jane’s letters anxiously scanned by her sister for signs of undeclared grief. No less important than the writing of letters is the vigilant reading of letters, which are always something more or less than the inward consciousness of the writer. They will only yield up their full meaning when read as patiently as Elizabeth reads the letters of Jane, ‘re-perusing’ them for marks of emotional concealment, ‘dwelling on’ their evasions or blind spots, scrutinising every line for ‘want of that cheerfulness which had been used to characterize her style’ (pp. 204, 210).

It is tempting to see in the correspondence between the sisters, which culminates in Jane’s breathless report of Lydia’s elopement, the trace of a more fully epistolary ‘First Impressions’, and there may be another such trace in the correspondence that Elizabeth maintains with Charlotte following Charlotte’s move to Kent. The heroine’s separation from one confidante or the other for most of the action suggests, as *Sense and Sensibility* never does, the structural preconditions of a novel in letters. If so, however, Austen was writing epistolary narrative of a complex, unreliable kind, requiring that it be read between the lines for lapses in candour or assessed in the light of distortions particular to each narrator. Charlotte’s marriage makes her a guarded, self-censoring writer whose letters display nothing more illuminating than ‘Mr Collins’s picture of Hunsford and Rosings rationally softened’ (p. 166). Jane

<sup>10</sup> George Austen to Thomas Cadell, 1 November 1797; Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 29 January 1813; both quoted in Pat Rogers’s introduction to *PP*, pp. xxiv, xxx.

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is a deficient narrator not only from personal reticence but from her trusting nature, and as Elizabeth notes of her letter about Wickham and his honourable intentions, '[n]o one but Jane ... could flatter herself with such an expectation' (p. 308). Elsewhere Austen is drawn to correspondence less as a vehicle of dramatic representation or psychological outpouring than as a medium of cool deception or covert attack: witness the 'high flown expressions' of Miss Bingley's letters to Jane, which Elizabeth assesses 'with all the insensibility of distrust' (p. 131), or Collins's knife-twisting letter of condolence on Lydia's disgrace, inserted with tension-snapping comic timing that rivals the porter scene in *Macbeth*. The need to treat letters as a slippery, inherently untrustworthy medium, always to be analysed or decoded with care, is nowhere more fully registered than in the chapter devoted to Elizabeth's obsessive, fluctuating reading of Darcy's letter, during which '[s]he studied every sentence: and her feelings towards its writer were at times widely different' (p. 235). In attempting to undo the damage of his botched proposal, this carefully meditated letter is among the most significant and enigmatic utterances in the book, still quietly reverberating – "Did it," said he, "did it *soon* make you think better of me?" (p. 408) – in the closing chapters.

### Authority

Yet for all Austen's evident attraction to letters, if not as reliable narration or unstudied self-portraiture then as interpretative challenges for both characters and readers, *Pride and Prejudice* also exhibits some frustration with their use as narrative vehicles. When Bingley as letter-writer thinks it 'too much, to remember at night all the foolish things that were said in the morning' (p. 53), he echoes the kind of objection that had been made since Fielding's *Shamela* to the enabling conventions of epistolary novels, with their pseudo-instantaneous delivery of implausibly particularised reports. Such objections intensified markedly throughout Austen's lifetime, and despite its ongoing currency with circulating-library audiences the novel in letters was increasingly being disparaged or discarded by leading novelists. Burney, who never resumed the mode after *Evelina*, is herself an instance of this trend, and in *Northanger Abbey* it is Burney's non-epistolary fiction that Austen singles out for praise (NA, p. 31). A relevant later case is Walter Scott, who conspicuously abandons letter-narrative part-way through *Redgauntlet* (1824), citing not only its cumbersome and artificial nature but also, crucially, its lack of provision for objective or heterodiegetic narrative guidance. Even multi-voiced epistolary fiction, as Scott writes on shifting to a third-person mode, 'can seldom be found to contain all in which it is necessary to instruct the reader for his full

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comprehension of the story'.<sup>11</sup> Mischievously, Scott elsewhere describes an old lady who liked to have *Grandison* read to her above other novels “‘because,” said she, “should I drop asleep in course of the reading, I am sure when I awake, I shall have lost none of the story, but shall find the party, where I left them, *conversing in the cedar-parlour*”’.<sup>12</sup>

Austen’s own fondness for the cedar parlour notwithstanding, much the same joke is implied by the effect of burlesque acceleration in ‘Sir Charles Grandison’, a manuscript playlet that is sometimes attributed directly to her, though probably composed under her guidance by a young niece. In a neat display of amused impatience, the glacial pace of Richardson’s narrative is drastically quickened to the span of an afterpiece farce, with the same frenzy of staccato dialogue, hectic stagecraft – ‘*Exit Bridget, exit Mr. Reeves at different doors. – calls behind the Scenes –*’ (*LM*, p. 560) – and arbitrary lurches of plot. The clunky infrastructure and rhetorical constraints of epistolary fiction may also underlie Austen’s arch farewell to the genre and its conventions in the third-person ‘Conclusion’ to ‘Lady Susan’, which is often considered a later addition. In her teasing declaration that ‘[t]his Correspondence, by a meeting between some of the Parties & a separation between the others, could not, to the great detriment of the Post office Revenue, be continued longer’ (*LM*, p. 75), one hears emerge the assured, urbane voice of the mature novels, decisively intervening in the final pages to clarify and resolve the plot. No longer is there a kinship with Richardson here, and instead Austen’s words bear out Claude Rawson’s sense that ‘in her technical habits and presentational strategies, her deepest affinities were with Fielding’.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the passage recalls one of Fielding’s sly digs against *Pamela* in *Joseph Andrews* (1742), a novel that uses a self-consciously artificial, wittily managerial style of third-person narration to showcase a technical alternative to Richardson’s method. As Fielding writes with mock regret, *Joseph Andrews* could not be an epistolary novel for one insurmountable reason: ‘and this was, that poor *Fanny* [the heroine of the work] could neither write nor read’.<sup>14</sup>

It is a commonplace of literary history that Austen’s breakthrough achievement was to unite the divergent narrative techniques of Richardson and

<sup>11</sup> Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> Ioan Williams (ed.), *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment, 1660–1830: Stress Points in the English Augustan Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 279.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 49.

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Fielding into a flexible heterodiegetic mode that could also convey the intimacy of homodiegetic introspection. As Dorrit Cohn puts it with reference to the style of presentation she calls ‘narrated monologue’, ‘Austen seems precisely to cast the spirit of epistolary fiction into the mold of third-person narration.’<sup>15</sup> Yet Austen never wholly discards the more wilfully artificial side of Fielding’s practice, notably his fondness for disrupting the illusion of natural narrative with self-conscious reminders of his shaping authorial presence. *Pride and Prejudice* contains no frame-breaking gesture as overt as Austen’s joke about courtship novels and their compulsory outcomes in *Northanger Abbey*, where the heroine’s uncertainty about the future ‘can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity’ (NA, p. 259). But several passages in the novel come close to this, including the emphatic authorial judgment of the final chapter, in which, writes Austen with belated, head-shaking frankness about Mrs Bennet, ‘I wish I could say . . . that the accomplishment of her earnest desire [in marrying off several daughters] produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life’ (*P&P*, p. 427).

For narrative theorists and literary historians who prize Austen as a pioneer of free indirect style, these are regrettable intrusions, blemishes in a method to be praised above all for its elimination of authorial personality. ‘There is a narrator who is prominent as a story-teller and moralist’, Roy Pascal concedes of Austen’s novels, ‘but who is (with rare lapses) non-personal, non-defined, and therefore may enjoy access to the most secret privacy of the characters.’<sup>16</sup> Yet these ‘lapses’ were for Austen an important part of her creative repertoire, and there is some evidence that she felt *Pride and Prejudice* committed too few, not least her well-known comment, plainly with *Tom Jones* in mind, that the novel ‘wants to be stretched out here & there’ with digressive or metafictional chapters ‘that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile’ (*Letters*, p. 212). Though Austen never fully replicates the insistent authorial first person (or ‘second self’) of Fielding’s practice, neither does she discard this register as thoroughly as theoretical textbooks sometimes suggest. In their eagerness to correct readers who claim to hear throughout the novels the companionable voice of Jane, narratologists can sound somewhat robotic in their insistence on impersonal as opposed to authorial narration, or on narrative discourse as

<sup>15</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester University Press, 1977), p. 45.



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opposed to a narrating voice, not least in the rhetorical move of ungendering the narrator that is sometimes made. For Pascal, who refers to Austen's narrator as 'he' in contradistinction to the historical author, 'so truly is this impersonal narrator the "spirit of the story" that one cannot ascribe him/her a sex'. Mieke Bal is likewise mindful that '[t]he narrator of *Emma* is not Jane Austen' – happily, Bal admits that 'the historical person Jane Austen is not without importance' – and makes similarly heavy weather of the issue: 'I shall here and there refer to the narrator as "it," however odd this may seem.'<sup>17</sup> Extreme versions of this position allow the presence of no narrator at all, only narrative as an autonomous discourse, and while there are good theoretical reasons for maintaining the author/narrator distinction as an analytic tool, to clamp it too rigidly on prose of such delicate fluidity is to risk seeming tone-deaf. Bal and Pascal by no means share the obtuseness of the early reader who responded to the penetrating intelligence of Austen's voice by declaring *Pride and Prejudice* 'too clever to have been written by a woman'.<sup>18</sup> But they underestimate the convergence or even identity between shaping author and narrating persona that Austen from time to time implies – a convergence, in the light of the novels' title pages (*Pride and Prejudice* is 'By the Author of "Sense and Sensibility"'); *Sense and Sensibility* is 'By a Lady'), that makes the gender reassignments of theory look odd indeed.

At times this narrating voice is a clarifying presence, and provides readers with firm guidance in matters of interpretation and judgment. The first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* ends with a brisk but lucid character sketch of the Bennet parents, and in Volume II the analysis is amplified with a careful blend of sympathy and severity that heralds the moralising wisdom of George Eliot. Abruptly, one of the novel's running comic motifs – in which Austen has made us complicit by our laughter – is here redefined as a serious and multi-faceted moral problem. Now we must understand the marriage in new terms, as a tragedy, self-inflicted by youthful imprudence, that has blighted Mr Bennet's life, and left 'all his views of domestic happiness . . . overthrown'. Yet while recognising his predicament, and deploring the contemptible shallowness of his wife, we must also deplore, as dereliction of duty to the family as a whole, the consolation he takes in mockery and teasing; far from continuing to laugh with the husband, we should now condemn 'that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible' (*P&P*, pp. 262–3). Later still, Austen inserts a similarly rigorous analysis of the financial catch at the novel's

<sup>17</sup> Pascal, *Dual Voice*, p. 45; Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd edn (University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Austen-Leigh, *Memoir*, p. 149.

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heart, answering, with balanced fellow feeling and blame, essential but previously unarticulated questions about the Bennets' failure to defuse the ticking time-bomb of the entailed estate – 'for, of course, they were to have a son' (p. 340). Comparable moments of more or less intrusive explanation elsewhere bring even the most unsympathetic characters within the reach, if not of the narrator's compassion, then at least of her understanding, including the appalling Mr Collins (p. 78) and the vicious Miss Bingley (p. 298).

What makes moral analysis of this directness so arresting, however, is that it arises so infrequently, and as a rule also belatedly, only once readers have had scope to make assessments of their own from the direct, neutral evidence of dialogue and action. Even by Austen's standards elsewhere, *Pride and Prejudice* contains an unusually high proportion of unmediated dialogue, some of it presented with so little narrative intervention that – for all Austen's skill in equipping her characters with distinctive idiolects – it can even be unclear who is speaking at certain points. Rereading the text in its published form, Austen was struck by the paucity of inquirers in her conversation scenes, commenting that 'a "said he" or a "said she" would sometimes make the Dialogue more immediately clear – but I do not write for such dull Elves "As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves"' (*Letters*, p. 210).

The rationale appended at this point (adapting Scott, who presents his poem *Marmion* (1808) as incomprehensible 'to that dull elf / Who cannot image to himself') says much about Austen's general preference for coaxing readers, in the absence of full authorial explanation, to interpret and evaluate for themselves. Though willing enough to give subtle, insightful assessments of her heroine's consciousness, as when we learn that 'Elizabeth, agitated and confused, rather *knew* that she was happy, than *felt* herself to be so' (*P&P*, p. 413), Austen's narrator is pointedly non-omniscient when it comes to Bingley or Darcy. Explanations of what these characters think or feel are scarce, with emphasis placed instead on the uncertainties posed to Elizabeth and Jane by their inscrutable conduct or cryptic words. Rather than instruct us in how to understand Darcy, the narrator instead reports, in patient but noncommittal style, the conflicting conjectures he inspires in those around him, or the puzzling external signs that make him 'difficult to understand' (p. 202). In a novel concerned above all with uncertainties about true character, with the unreliability of impressions and the elusiveness of explanations, Austen's reticence – which extends to withholding key information, even to active misdirection – becomes a central technique, replicating for readers the quandaries of the heroine, and making us undertake, like her, an effort of enquiry and discovery. For D. A. Miller, the novels in general are typified by 'pseudoclosures', solutions that turn out to be 'untrue, incomplete,