

MEAGHAN MALONE

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“You Have Bewitched Me Body and Soul”:  
Masculinity and the Female Gaze in  
Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

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For many readers, the connection between Jane Austen’s novels and the sexualized body is hardly a logical one. There are certainly no explicit sex scenes in the beloved Miss Austen’s works, and it would be easy for her readers to assume that she shies away entirely from depictions of bodily passion since all of her novels refrain from portrayals of physical contact between her lovers. Such assumptions, however, overlook Austen’s subtlety as an author. Sexuality in Austen’s novels is never explicit; nonetheless, it permeates every look, gesture, and letter that passes between her lovers. Sexuality is, in fact, at the heart of all of Austen’s major works, and male sexuality in particular. Her heroes, however, are constructed by a female author, and, through Austen’s use of free

indirect discourse, are subsequently filtered through the eyes of female characters. As a result, male sexuality is essentially *created* through multiple female perspectives, and the female gaze thus becomes integral to the ideal of masculinity developed in Austen's novels.

Writing in the tradition of the novel of sensibility and its "Man of Feeling," Austen develops male characters who are never two-dimensional and are always complicated. Her heroes accommodate two rival models of late-eighteenth-century masculinity, fusing Edmund Burke's traditional, chivalrous, masculine ideal and Mary Wollstonecraft's more modern, authoritative, and virile male individual. Austen's heroes thereby embody an innovative model of masculinity, and are fashioned by the author as both subjects and objects of desire. The aloof Mr. Darcy is no exception to this rule. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen achieves a new model of masculinity through the female gaze, which casts Elizabeth Bennet in the role of sexual subject, and Darcy in the role of desired object. Furthermore, the dynamics of the gaze serve to create equality between Darcy and Elizabeth, who both simultaneously desire and are desired. By employing the female gaze in her novels, Austen advocates a progressive brand of masculinity in which women are not servile and sexually or emotionally passive, and men are able and willing to adapt to their lovers' desires.

#### EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MASCULINIST STUDIES

Austen's male characters can be contextualized within the debates regarding masculinity that existed during her own lifetime. In post-French Revolution Europe, numerous anxieties about the "proper" behaviour of men emerged as traditional views

met with new interpretations of what it meant to be a man. In eighteenth-century British society, however, the delineations of appropriate male stoicism and moderation were not always clear. The importance placed on manners in Romantic Britain was theoretically threatening to male strength and potency. Michèle Cohen articulates the complexity of this situation by arguing that the “social spaces” of balls, operas, and dinners in which the sexes met and conversed were the domains of women (59, 47). Neither fully public nor private, social spaces were places of performance, locations where men and women constantly watched each other and moderated their behaviours accordingly. These were places of spectacle and parade, where social interaction facilitated the development of the social power of the gaze. The presence of women in social spaces, however, was essential to a man’s full achievement of politeness, and, by extension, the status of gentleman (47).

As the British nation state grew and became increasingly modernized, debates regarding the significance of chivalry in society and the correct balance between masculine rationality and sensibility were frequent in the literary, political, and philosophic discourses regarding masculinity. The ideal man was virile and powerful, but self-controlled; polite and chivalric, but never effeminate; vigorous, but not overly passionate; and always rational and intimately concerned with the affairs of Britain. As Tim Fulford argues in *Romanticism and Masculinity*, definitions of both masculinity and chivalry became increasingly fragmented and contentious during the revolutionary period of the 1790s, and political arguments regarding the appropriate conduct of men and women were common (5). Two of the most vocal commentators in these debates were Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft, each of whom prescribed a very different model of masculinity.

Despite the increasing contestations of the relevance of chivalry in society, the concept of chivalry forms the core of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). For Burke, chivalry had a very precise definition, one that differs only slightly from the modern-day conceptions of knights in shining armour rescuing the weak and helpless. Specifically, it was:

That generous loyalty to rank and sex...that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive...the spirit of an exalted freedom...The cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise. (74)

Reflecting on the political and social events in late-eighteenth-century France, Burke lamented that “the age of chivalry is gone...and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever” (74). Steven Bruhm provides an insightful analysis of Burke's reading of the storming of Versailles and the ensuing capture of Marie Antoinette (64-66). In the same way that Austen's novels focus on the process of viewing, the scene of the queen's arrest is, according to Bruhm, framed by Burke as theatrical spectacle. In order to condemn the type of violence that ensues when revolution takes the place of tradition, Burke dramatically describes the barbarous assault on the Queen's bedroom by a “band of cruel ruffians and assassins” (Burke 69) who “pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked” to temporary safety (70). The scene reads like a piece of Gothic theatre, and by demanding that the ideal spectator “re clothe the naked body and soften the horror of the scene” (Bruhm 66), Burke attempts to elicit a traditionally chivalrous response from his readers as they visualize his theatrical rendering of the attack. He relegates Marie

Antoinette to the level of visual object, suggesting that a man's masculinity can be assessed by his response to the scene of her capture. A "proper" British man could not possibly fail to respond chivalrously when faced with this scene of female violation. The emotional response such abuse would elicit would force him to act—or at least feel inclined to act—heroically and save the helpless woman from her captors. Through the visual culture of sensibility, Burke thus espouses the traditional view of masculinity in which women are subordinate to men.

Evidently, Burke was in no way concerned with modernizing men's sexual identities (Kramp 20). Rather, he called for a return to traditional values, claiming that chivalry, which threatened to be destroyed by the "new conquering empire of light and reason," had given "character to modern Europe" (74, 75). Throughout his *Reflections*, Burke's traditional, chivalrous view of manliness is made synonymous with sentimentality, which sparked controversy from many of his contemporaries, including Mary Wollstonecraft (Fulford 5). Burke firmly believed that men of power can and must be chivalrous and sentimental, and though his political adversaries saw his "man of sensibility" as weak and effeminate (5), Burke insisted that "we have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms" (*Reflections* 83).

This emphasis on the human body was not refuted by Mary Wollstonecraft, who herself counted men's physical strength amongst their greatest assets, and, indeed, the only way in which they might be considered superior to women. She called for men to use their bodies, which is their "noble prerogative," to their advantage, stating that their "talents are only to be unfolded by industry" (*Rights of Men* 135, 104). Wollstonecraft, however, posited her demands for virility and reason against Burke's ideals of

aestheticism and emotion, a fundamental opposition that Jane Austen merges in her male characters. Wollstonecraft's writings establish a clear dichotomy between sensibility and rationality, which are, according to her, diametrically opposed. Fulford explains that Wollstonecraft attempted to refute her society's "association of masculinity with sublime power, femininity with beautiful weakness" (17), and in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she blatantly mocked Burke's prescriptions for men, claiming that "the days of true heroism are over, when a citizen fought for his country like a Fabricius or a Washington" (327). She argues that the traditional demands for chivalry were merely the means of keeping women in a subordinate position to men and "insultingly supporting [men's] own superiority" (120). Undoubtedly to the applause of all feminists who followed her, she writes: "So ludicrous, in fact, do these ceremonies appear to me, that I scarcely am able to govern my muscles, when I see a man start with eager and serious solitude to lift a handkerchief, or shut a door, when the *lady* could have done it herself" (120, Wollstonecraft's emphasis). In her opinion, Burke's manly chivalry was, ironically, emasculating, as the kind of sentimentality that he urged men to display was the type of sensibility society predominantly associated with and expected from women (Kramp 33). Wollstonecraft and writers like her argued that chivalry had no real social relevance in the modern world. Writing with Burke directly in mind, Wollstonecraft stressed that "sensibility is not reason," and that the ideal man would, conversely, blend "happily reason and sensibility into one character" (135). Austen's leading men embody this fusion. She successfully combines Burke's ideals of romance and chivalry with Wollstonecraft's reason and rationality to create men who are able to express emotion while never descending into foppery, melancholy, or sycophancy.

“SENSIBLE, GOOD-HUMOURED, HANDSOME, CONVENIENTLY RICH”: AUSTEN’S  
MEN

Clearly, Jane Austen wrote in a period of contested masculinities, though her leading men hardly adapt a brand of masculinity that is as dichotomized as Burke or Wollstonecraft would have it. Her men are located in a very specific cultural and historical moment, one that not only included war, but also the changing perceptions of class and gender in British society; consequently, the men in her novels must respond to numerous cultural forces that comprise their modernizing society (Kramp 1, 6). *Pride and Prejudice*’s Mr. Darcy, for example, must navigate and mediate his own sexual desires with the marriage prescriptions and expectations laid down for him by his family and society. The modern nation subsequently regulated how men shaped themselves as “sexual subjects” (1). Austen significantly refashions masculinity, however, by suggesting that these modern men are also capable of being fashioned as sexual objects.

The heroes that successfully win the hearts of Austen’s heroines embody not only Burkean “style and elegance,” but “*solid* qualities” as well (Mason 78). Austen clearly did not adhere to all the prescriptions for male conduct that were being discussed and dictated by her contemporaries. In the construction of her leading men (though not always of her supporting male characters, such as Mr. Collins and Sir Walter Elliot, for example), Austen essentially situates herself between—and thus reconciles—Burke’s demand for a return to chivalry and Wollstonecraft’s call for authoritative virility. Her heroes are passionate, sensitive, and full of emotion, but also mentally and physically formidable. Consequently, Austen, whose fiction “develops *out* of Sensibility and *into*

Romanticism,” as one critic aptly describes it, re-evaluates and modernizes the Man of Feeling, a prominent fixture in the novels of Sensibility (Nagle 98). Sensibility and rationality, however, are not polar opposites in Austen’s canon as they are in the writings of Burke and Wollstonecraft; rather, as Christopher Nagle suggests, “Sensibility imagines *feeling beyond the bounds of reason*” (99, Nagle’s emphasis). Thus, while the Man of Feeling “literally makes a spectacle of himself,” as Nagle characterizes it, Austen’s men, particularly Darcy, are much more private, and their displays of feeling are internalized rather than public (101). Austen’s men and women are “sensible,” combining both “sense *and feeling*,” and she effectively creates what Nagle coins as a “new variety of Men and Women of Feeling” (103). While Austen’s heroes are chivalrous, they are never foolish or insincere. She essentially takes the “masculine paradigm” that was embodied by national Romantic figures—such as Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, for example—and, according to Joseph Kestner, “democratizes it...to instantiate this paradigm into domestic and quotidian contexts” (148).

One of the fundamental aspects of Austen’s unique brand of masculinity, however, is that it is always based on women’s needs and wants; her novels subsequently require what Sarah Ailwood terms a “social reconstruction of gender,” one that requires greater equality between women and men (11). While this reformation of gender roles necessarily facilitates the need for the development of a “new woman” who is able to enter into a marriage of equals, and who can maintain an effective but loving household, it also requires the development of a “new man,” able to respond, as Ailwood suggests, to women’s desire “for equality, for mutual respect, for social and political participation” (11). In fact, all of Austen’s heroes neglect to shower women with the multitude of



compliments they were expected to pay them, and reject the farcical gallantry that relegated women to a subordinate role in their relationships with men (Morris n. pag.). Ultimately, Austen creates a world in which the sexes must co-exist in order to function, and male and female characters serve to facilitate *each other's* development. Mr. Darcy, for example, who thinks of himself, as Judith Wilt puts it, as “set [and] finished,” is “astounded to find in Elizabeth Bennet another chapter yet to go in the story of [his life]” (67). Male sexuality in Austen’s novels, though palpable, in no way requires female passivity; rather, it develops out of and in response to the wants and needs of women.

#### SHE’S GOT THE LOOK, TOO: THE LIMITATIONS OF FEMINIST DISCUSSIONS OF THE GAZE

I have suggested that, in Austen’s novels, gender is performative. Negotiating the myriad interactions required within the “social spaces” of their daily lives, her heroes and heroines fashion and moderate their behaviours in response to the visual cues of others. Sexuality is, by extension, inextricably connected to visibility. As such, Austen’s heroines make their wants and needs known through their gaze. Her narrators describe these women looking at men, and her readers can infer the palpable sexual chemistry that subsequently develops between heroine and hero. The female gaze is essential in the formation of her heroes’ masculinity. By connecting the acts of looking and desiring so explicitly, Austen’s novels enact the visual culture of the gaze long before feminist and theoretical discussions began to develop.

Feminist analyses of the gaze have their antecedents in psychoanalytic theory. Freud,<sup>1</sup> and later Lacan, argue that the gaze is a “function of desire,” one that subsequently creates desire in the gazer; for Lacan, this desire is “caught, fixed in the picture” (Lacan 92). Both theorists intimately connect the gaze to a human’s desire for pleasure and sexual gratification, and each argues that the bond between subject and object is a complicated and nuanced one: though the subject, according to Freud, places him or herself at a distance from the object, the language of entrapment employed by Lacan suggests that the object is able to wield a certain level of influence through his or her own objectification. Significantly, however, the gaze is not explicitly gendered in Freud’s or Lacan’s discussions. Rather, it signifies *human* desire.

This interpretation of the gaze as gender neutral has been largely unacknowledged by the feminist critics who analyze it merely as a tool of women’s subjugation, assuming that the gaze is inherently male, and that women are forced into a passive role as its object. Critics E. Ann Kaplan,<sup>2</sup> John Berger,<sup>3</sup> and Laura Mulvey,<sup>4</sup> for example, blatantly claim that the scopophilic instinct is a male prerogative. Stating it succinctly, critics have tended to assume that “*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch

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<sup>1</sup> See Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

<sup>2</sup> See “Is the Gaze Male?” (1983).

<sup>3</sup> See *Ways of Seeing* (1972).

<sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey’s 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is perhaps the most controversial refutation of the existence of a female gaze. In her argument, which examines on-screen depictions of women, Mulvey, like Kaplan and Berger, argues that a woman in patriarchal society stands as a “signifier for the male other”: she is the “bearer, not maker of meaning,” and men can project their sexual fantasies onto her (35). It is the man, through his gaze, that “imposes” meaning onto a woman (35). Mulvey reiterates the traditional feminist approach to the gaze, stating that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female”; women fulfill an “exhibitionist role” in their relationships with men whereby they are “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (39, 40).

themselves being looked at” (Berger 37-38, Berger’s emphasis). According to such logic, it is psychologically inevitable that women be the sexual objects of men. If anything, however, such interpretations only justify men’s objectification and suppression of women as a biologically sanctioned inevitability. To oversimplify the matter even further, feminist critics have effectively refused to acknowledge the possibility that a female gaze could exist; for Kaplan, the male gaze “carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it” (121). Laura Mulvey’s argument that the woman “*holds* the look, and plays to and signifies male desire” (40, my emphasis), however, makes room for some level of power or influence on the part of the woman. Arguably, a woman can desire a man as an object while also actively motivating his desire. Mulvey, Kaplan, and Berger all fail to account for this dynamic.

With their use of multiple layers of perception, prominence of social settings, and subsequent emphases on both visuality and the interactions between characters, Jane Austen’s novels are particularly fertile ground for the application of these discussions. Significantly, the female gaze was often alluded to in the literature of the Romantic and Victorian periods: referred to what Mark Hennelly aptly labels “the lady-in-waiting or lady-in-watching syndrome,” the motif of a woman looking out a window was extremely prevalent in the English canon, particularly the English women’s canon (191, 192). Jane Austen’s corpus is no exception. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the Bennet sisters first see Mr. Bingley through an upstairs window at Longbourn (Austen 6), and Elizabeth glimpses at Darcy through windows several times over the course of the novel, particularly during her travels with her aunt and uncle Gardiner (196-97). It is implicit

throughout her novels that the female gaze can and does exist, that women cannot only return men's looks and "play" to their desire, as Mulvey argues, but also objectify men through their own gaze. The representation of Austen's world depends on women, and it is around this female gaze that her plots and characterizations pivot. Moreover, the development of her male characters and their sexuality depends entirely on the gazes of women. What would Darcy be without the descriptions that Elizabeth provides of him? Austen anticipates and complicates critics such as Kaplan, Berger, and Mulvey; for Austen, the existence of a female gaze that is independent of male demands and desire is indisputable and essential to the development of masculinity. Elizabeth, though she receives Darcy's gaze, is also a sexual subject herself. Moreover, Austen's brand of masculinity is one that develops in response to women's objectification and sexualisation of men.

MR. FITZWILLIAM DARCY: HAUGHTY ARISTOCRAT, SOCIALLY INEPT GENTLEMAN,  
AND UNYIELDINGLY STEADFAST LOVER

Perhaps it is because they are so intimately connected to women's needs and desires that Jane Austen's men continue to resonate with her (predominately female) readers well into the twenty-first century. Her male characters are amongst some of the most memorable in the English canon, and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy is no exception. Arguably Austen's best loved and most loathed hero, Darcy has, for nearly two centuries, repelled and infuriated readers with the same taciturnity and arrogance with which he ultimately woos them. When he slights Elizabeth Bennet at the outset of *Pride and Prejudice* with the infamous retort that she is "tolerable, but not handsome enough to

tempt *me*” (Austen 7), Mr. Darcy’s fate is sealed: the reader becomes as determined as Elizabeth to dismiss him as “the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world” (7). It is impossible to reject him entirely, though, and, until he snubs Elizabeth, he captivates the attention of the reader as well as every person in the room at the Meryton ball with his “fine, tall person, handsome features, [and] noble mien” (6). Though he is “clever” (11), and he is an unwavering friend to Bingley, it certainly is not his sparkling personality that charms people: he is “haughty, reserved, and fastidious, and his manners, though well bred, were not inviting...[he] was continually giving offense” (11). Nonetheless, there is something about Darcy that makes him impossible to ignore.

The subtly sexualized context in which Darcy is first introduced is, perhaps, what makes him immediately attractive to the reader. Austen provides a physical description of Darcy as a means of introducing him to her audience, and his comment on Elizabeth’s physicality, though lacklustre, immediately establishes a relationship between the two that is, if not erotic, then inherently physical. Significantly, Darcy’s initial description of Elizabeth as an unobjectionable, but wholly underwhelming, specimen lacks any passion. His “gaze,” if it can be called such in these opening scenes, is detached and objective. He looks on Elizabeth not with the amorous intentions of a lover, but with the analytical scrutiny of a critic, and succeeds in “detect[ing] with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form” (16). Elizabeth is reduced to her constituent physical parts by Darcy, but he does not sexualize her until he begins to appreciate the beauty and power of her “fine eyes” (19). Her eyes draw him in and sexually charm him. For Darcy, Elizabeth’s eyes are her most attractive feature, and though he had previously succeeded in making it clear to “himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her

face...he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes” (16). Her eyes are not simply pretty, but expressive, and Darcy is suddenly seized by an incongruous “wish to know more of her” (16). Caroline Bingley immediately recognizes the sexual competition Elizabeth poses to her once she sees Darcy’s appreciation of Elizabeth’s eyes (Willis 158). Darcy also quickly becomes aware, however, of her eyes’ power, and of the threat that their gaze poses to him; once he fully appreciates the level to which he would have to condescend in courting Elizabeth Bennet, he begins to “feel the danger of paying [her] too much attention” (Austen 44). As Sarah Ailwood argues, Darcy must choose between his sexual desire for Elizabeth and the rational views of sexuality and marriage imposed on him by his education, his society, and his family (152). He is torn between his sexuality and rationality, and consequently illuminates the inconsistencies within Wollstonecraft’s prescriptions for masculinity: though he possesses both virility and reason, he demonstrates that the two often directly conflict, a possibility that Wollstonecraft does not account for in her *Vindications*.

Despite his seemingly modern—albeit implicit—sexuality, Fitzwilliam Darcy is very much a product of his own time and place. Michael Kramp contends that Darcy adheres perfectly to Burke’s definition of chivalric masculinity: he is a “man of ancestral heritage,” belonging to an ancient and landed, though untitled, family, in addition to being “disciplined,” “virile yet genteel, romantic yet responsible” (74). These binaries, however, undermine and complicate Kramp’s connection of Darcy with Burkean chivalry. At times, Darcy is decidedly *un*-chivalric: he refuses to dance at the Meryton ball, despite the fact that numerous ladies at the assembly are without partners; he

deliberately insults Elizabeth during his first proposal, actively drawing attention to his own wealth and status; he is taciturn when he should be social. Still, he is secretly loyal to Elizabeth despite her “inferiority” and “family obstacles” (Austen 145), and discretely saves the Bennet family from complete social ruin following Lydia’s elopement with Wickham. Furthermore, by refusing to adhere entirely to Burkean chivalry, Darcy, as Wollstonecraft would argue, degrades neither himself nor Elizabeth, remaining “manly” while never relegating her to the position of powerless subordinate. Darcy thus embodies both Burke’s and Wollstonecraft’s prescriptions for masculinity, and tempers both with a healthy dose of practicality, publicly keeping his emotions under control though he is more than capable of “[expressing] himself...as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do” (280). Furthermore, as will be discussed, he requires the equality between the sexes that Wollstonecraft demands. By the time that Darcy meets Elizabeth, he has grown tired of being pursued by women who wax poetic about his perfections, and is intrigued by Elizabeth *because* she does not play to his pride (Morris n. pag.). As Ivor Morris states, Elizabeth serves to dispel “the enrapturing notion of his own consequence” (n. pag.), and is in no way relegated to the position of insipid inferior in their relationship. Darcy reciprocates her wit, challenges her prejudices, questions her criticisms, and ultimately respects her as a “woman worthy of being pleased” (Austen 282).

Also in keeping with Wollstonecraft’s prescriptions for men, Darcy is an unequivocally sexual being, and every look he directs at Elizabeth is permeated by sexuality. Charlotte Lucas, for example, perceives that Darcy “certainly looked at her friend a great deal...[with] an earnest, steadfast gaze” (139). As Ailwood observes,

however, Darcy's sexuality challenges "the politics of desire within courtship practices" (150), and Austen subsequently uses Darcy as a medium for exposing the complexities of male sexuality in the Romantic era. According to Ailwood, this exploration is achieved through the male gaze and by presenting parts of the narrative through Darcy's point of view (what Ailwood calls "focalization") (149). Both of these techniques allow the reader entry into Darcy's own consciousness and provide a view of the world as it appears through his eyes. Katharine Rogers claims that in many of the novels written by female authors of the Romantic period, the heroes' feelings and emotions "usually remain a mystery"<sup>5</sup>; generally, the only understanding the reader has of the internal workings of these men derives from the heroines, who watch and interpret their every move (9). Such is not the case, however, with Mr. Darcy, and his interiority is developed through both focalization and his gaze, providing the reader not only with a clear contrast between his and Elizabeth's perceptions of events, but also insight into his feelings for her (Ailwood 149). The reader watches Darcy watching Elizabeth, and realizes his physical attraction to and intimidation by her long before she does.

All of these facets of Darcy's being, however, hang on the perceptions of women. Austen's male characters are unique because they are constructed by a female author and subsequently filtered through the eyes of female characters. This method of characterization is made possible by Austen's expert use of free indirect discourse. Through it, the reader is tied neither to the perceptions of a single character, nor the biases of an omniscient narrator; rather, through Austen's fluid narration, her audience gains insight into the thought processes of all her characters, both male and female.

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<sup>5</sup> Rogers points especially to Fanny Burney's male characters, particularly *Cecilia's* Mortimer Delvile, as well as Mr. Glanville in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*.



Though the reader is granted access to his thoughts, characters such as Darcy are, in effect, *made* by women: the female narrator describes Darcy looking at Elizabeth; these looks are interpreted by Elizabeth, Charlotte Lucas, Caroline Bingley, and Jane Bennet; Elizabeth's own biases regarding Darcy's character are combined with those of the narrator and the novel's other characters. The reader develops a fuller perception of his character through exposure to these multiple levels of predominantly female perception. The audience thus comes to know Darcy as a sexual creature *through* these women.

Though the world of Austen's novels has traditionally been viewed as predominately female, the famous first line 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" (1)—clearly places men at the centre of the plot; they are the motivating force in the women's lives. While Austen's reference to them as "fine thing[s]" and the "rightful property" of women (1) is delivered with her characteristic irony, she presents an interesting gender inversion at the outset of her novel: men are essentially pawns in the lives of her women, and are, consequently, objectified by them. Particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen explores the contrived nature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century courtship practices. For characters like Charlotte Lucas, the act of wooing is very much a conscious game played by women, who subsequently hold the proverbial reins in their relationships with men. Charlotte cautions Elizabeth about Jane Bennet's shyness, warning that "if a woman conceals her affection...from *the object* of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him" (15, my emphasis). The man is the object in this game, and he must be carefully monitored and manipulated, lest another woman seize his attentions. The realm of courtship, which comprises one of Michèle Cohen's "social spaces" (59), is

governed by women. They choose a man as their object, manipulate his attention and attractions, and ultimately decide whether or not he will be successful in his proposal of marriage. Austen's society was undoubtedly a patriarchal one, but she always subtly reminds her readers of these brief moments of empowerment that women could experience within the social system.

Austen's women are never passive observers. They not only objectify the men, but also consciously construct and adapt to the male gaze. Caroline Bingley is particularly adept at this skill, not only sexualizing Darcy through her gaze, but also sexualizing herself *for* him. After supper at Netherfield one evening, she insists on taking "a turn about the room" (Austen 41) with Elizabeth, fully knowing that their "figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking" (42). Darcy's subsequent reply that he "can admire [them] much better as [he sits] by the fire" (42) is exactly the response Miss Bingley had aimed to elicit. She knows that Darcy will sexualize her through his gaze, but she is hardly rendered a passive object by it; rather, she orchestrates the entire scenario. Her insistence on continuing to tease Darcy about his admission only serves to ensure that his eyes remain fixed on her. As Laura Mulvey might put it, Caroline Bingley *holds* Darcy's gaze, and actively "plays to" his desire (40). She wields a sexual power that directly matches Darcy's. Mulvey's imagined divide between "active/male" and "passive/female" (39) is entirely absent. Austen's women are "looked at" (Berger 38), to be sure, but only because they have actively sought men's attention; though they are the object of the male gaze, they are not always, or necessarily, objectified by it.

At times, the men of *Pride and Prejudice* are primarily present simply for the women's entertainment; they are on display. Such spectacle is perhaps nowhere more

obvious than in the scenes at Meryton where Lydia and Kitty Bennet and their aunt, Mrs. Philips, spend hours watching the handsome young militiamen, particularly Mr. Wickham, walk the streets of the town. George Wickham is undoubtedly a highly sexualized male character in the novel, second only to Darcy: “His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address” (Austen 54). First impressions—appropriately, the novel’s original title—are key to this story of personal biases and misunderstandings; significantly then, the immediate reactions the female characters have to the men they meet are based on their physical appearance. Wickham’s “happy readiness of conversation” (54) is only noticed once his physical stature is fully appreciated; his appearance and presence are, in fact, rarely overlooked or forgotten. He is oversexed at all times by the women of Elizabeth’s inner circle, and during their evenings in Meryton, “Mr Wickham was the happy man towards whom almost every female eye was turned” (57). He is on parade, and seen as a “[rival] for the notice of the fair” (57) by the other men at the assembly. With her depiction of the pleasure females can derive from the display of the male body, Austen complicates arguments by figures such as Kaplan and Mulvey long before such arguments were even articulated. The world of Austen’s novels is unquestioningly patriarchal, and, ultimately, the happiness of each of Austen’s heroines depends entirely on a proposal of marriage from a man. To be sure, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women had a rather limited amount of power in virtually all areas of their lives, both public and private. Austen never forgets this fact, and, as such, does not entirely invalidate Mulvey’s arguments regarding women’s subordination. Nonetheless, not only do characters like Caroline Bingley show the level of sexual power that a

woman can exercise by exploiting the patriarchal nature of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century courtship practices, male characters such as Darcy and Wickham prove that the female gaze does exist, carrying with it all the “power of action and possession” of the male gaze (Kaplan 121) . Women choreograph the world of courtship. They actively respond to the male gaze, sexualize themselves, and are more than capable of exploiting men as sexual pawns.

For Austen, female perceptions are thus powerful sexual tools. In a society where the spoken word is carefully guarded by social norms, the gaze becomes a potent medium for expressing forbidden desires. Looks and glances are a mode of free-flowing communication when all other modes of contact between the sexes are so strictly regulated. This connection through the eyes is a defining characteristic of the “ocular drama,” as Mark Hennelly cleverly terms it, that is Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship. Though the gaze is present in all of Austen’s major works, I agree with Sarah Ailwood’s assessment that it has a particularly erotic quality in *Pride and Prejudice*, as her analysis of the physical and sexual nature of Darcy and Elizabeth’s first meeting suggests (154-55). During their encounter at the Meryton ball, the gaze is introduced within the traditional gender hierarchy, and Elizabeth is judged by Darcy solely by her physicality. Later in their acquaintance, there is no question that he derives immense pleasure from Elizabeth’s body. His appreciation of her “beautiful...dark eyes” and “light and pleasing” figure (Austen 16) is the only instance in *Pride and Prejudice* in which Elizabeth’s physicality is described in any detail, and it is filtered through Darcy’s perceptions. His attraction to Elizabeth is highly sexual. According to Ailwood, “Darcy’s decision to wait until he has caught Elizabeth’s eye—until she is conscious of being looked at—before

looking away is a dramatisation of the power of the gaze to reaffirm male power over women” (154). Ailwood oversimplifies the point, however. Can the fact that Elizabeth meets his gaze not be a signal of sexual equality? Though Elizabeth is sometimes embarrassed by Mr. Darcy’s gaze, she is never intimidated and rarely objectified by it, instead assuming that “she drew his notice because there was a something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his ideas of right, than in any other person present” (Austen 38). In this regard, Austen is truly a visionary in her constructions of male and female sexuality.

Furthermore, Darcy is as subjected to Elizabeth’s gaze as she is to his. Because *Pride and Prejudice* focuses more on Elizabeth’s desire than on Darcy’s, it works against what Ailwood calls “the conventional narrative pattern of the courtship novel” (162). Lesley Willis furthers this analysis, arguing that the eye in *Pride and Prejudice* serves as both “a male and female symbol,” but is more significant in Elizabeth than Darcy, because, for her, it is both “object and agent” (158). The fact that Elizabeth can both desire and be desired challenges the traditional gender roles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it grants her a level of equality with Darcy, and the fact that he never challenges her sexualisation of him also has implications for his own masculinity. Darcy is a successful hero because he is a highly sexualized man who in no way requires docility from his equally sexual heroine. In the words of Ailwood, Elizabeth stands as the undisputed “erotic subject” to his “physically desirable male object” (142).

When she literally objectifies him, Elizabeth comes to realize the full extent of her romantic and sexual feelings for Darcy. In viewing objects that belong or are in some way linked to him, she feels a deep connection with him that she had never known in

their previous encounters. Once he is reduced to his constituent parts, Darcy's personal worth is realized in Elizabeth's eyes. The first instance of this realization occurs as Elizabeth reads the letter Darcy writes after the failure of his first proposal. Though the reader has been acquainted with Darcy's inner emotions throughout the novel, Elizabeth is allowed her first glimpse into his personal history and true feelings through this letter. She comes to know him best through his handwriting and his diction, and studies the letter as she had once studied his face and body language, "[examining] the meaning of every sentence" (Austen 157). The letter serves as a kind of surrogate for Darcy himself, and re-inspires all the feelings and more that he had once excited in Elizabeth: "amazement," "eagerness," anger, and "astonishment" (156), but also a desire to know him better. For the first time since their introduction, Elizabeth sees Darcy as something more than proud and deceitful; she realizes that "she had been blind," and understands that her view of him has been entirely incomplete: "partial, prejudiced, absurd" (159). She realizes she had not been seeing him correctly or truthfully. Significantly, the pivotal moment of what will eventually become their courtship occurs without any face-to-face contact; Darcy cannot objectify her through his gaze, for he is not even present, leaving Elizabeth in the subject role. Nonetheless, he remains an object of her imagination—he is a text that she reads. Interestingly, there is still an implicitly sexual connotation to his letter, since, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society, written correspondence was only considered appropriate between men and women if they were engaged or married (325, Stafford's note). Darcy must therefore privately deliver his letter to Elizabeth, lest he risk compromising her reputation (325, Stafford's note). Fiona Brideoake argues that their dialogue "constitutes the defiance and vulnerability that enables their eventual

intimacy,” and notes that their most “affectively charged exchanges” generally occur when the couple is alone and unsupervised (461); their entire relationship is, indeed, inherently risqué. The letter forges an intimate connection between Darcy and Elizabeth. Not only does it defy social conventions through its implicitly sexual nature, causing Darcy to ask Elizabeth to “pardon the freedom with which [he] demand[s] [her] attention” (Austen 150), it also allows Elizabeth to assume a subject position from which she can scrutinize and ultimately accept her feelings for him.

Elizabeth’s love for Darcy is fully solidified once she visits his home, and her confession to Jane that she had loved him from her “first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley” (286) is only partially made in jest. Pemberley is not only a marker of its master’s personality, but effectively speaks *for* Darcy, a man who, left to his own devices, is often unable to speak for himself. In *Manly Leaders in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*, Daniela Garofalo provides an interesting discussion of Pemberley (123-126). According to her, its delicate balance with its surroundings suggests Darcy’s natural right to power, and the estate suggests his “natural gentlemanliness” (123), a characteristic that Elizabeth had otherwise never attributed to him. Like his letter, Pemberley acts as a stand-in for Darcy himself in Elizabeth’s eyes; the estate is highly sexualized, and may even be read as a symbol for Darcy’s body. Garofalo contends that the landscape itself, with its protruding hills and running streams, is eroticized, and signals its master’s “phallic power” (125). As Elizabeth stares at the structure “standing well on rising ground,” she muses that “to be mistress of Pemberley might be something” (Austen 185). She daydreams not simply about the immense economic benefits that marriage to Darcy would bring, but also the possibility of becoming his wife and lover.

She feels the same pleasure in looking at Pemberley that Darcy does in looking at her, and, roaming about its grounds, she discovers “her lover’s hidden dimensions” (Ailwood 166, Brownstein 53). The estate allows Elizabeth to expand on the impressions of Darcy that she had begun to indulge with his letter. Placed in an active subject position, Elizabeth gazes on his home and, for the first time, appreciates the powerful sexual attraction she has toward Darcy. Once again, she must literally see him as an object and regard Pemberley as a synecdoche for the whole man in order to realize the scope of his appeal.

Once inside Pemberley, Elizabeth finds herself face-to-face with a portrait of its master, and “there was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth’s mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance” (Austen 189). In this instance, Darcy is literally an aesthetic object for Elizabeth to study, gaze at, criticize, and, ultimately, sexualize. Standing before his portrait, Elizabeth sees Darcy only as a physical specimen, and he is reduced to the “smile [on his] face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her” (189). When Elizabeth sees the portrait, she experiences what Garofalo labels as her first genuine “moment of erotic intimacy” with Darcy, and the painting “is as susceptible to Elizabeth’s attractions as the original it represents” (125). In objectifying and aestheticizing him, Elizabeth comes to realize his worth as a human being, his importance as “a brother, a landlord, a master” (Austen 189), and, ultimately, his potential as a lover.

Elizabeth is empowered by this objectifying and objectification. “She stood before the canvas...and fixed his eyes upon herself” (189); notably, as did Caroline Bingley, Elizabeth structures Darcy’s gaze so that she is the object of it. In this moment,



Elizabeth is simultaneously subject and object, and though Darcy figuratively stares at her, she returns his gaze. Out of this instance of likeness, Elizabeth fully accepts her attraction to Darcy. Pemberley thus comprises “a world of objects” that represents a completely different man than Elizabeth had come to know (Garofalo 126). Through her gaze, she objectifies him; through her objectification, she sexualizes him; and through her sexualisation, she comes to love him.

The brand of masculinity that Austen subsequently develops through Elizabeth’s gaze is thus an extremely progressive one. As stated, her gaze necessitates an equality between the sexes that Mary Wollstonecraft idealizes in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Elizabeth gazes at Darcy, and he at her; each simultaneously desires and is desired. The gaze is not only a medium of communication for forbidden wants, it also allows the lovers to see, literally and figuratively, eye-to-eye. Elizabeth and Darcy’s is a relationship of sexual reciprocity, and nowhere in *Pride and Prejudice* is Darcy feminized because he is an object of female desire; he remains virile and unquestionably masculine until the last.

Furthermore, the masculinity embodied by the figure of Mr. Darcy is dynamic and able to adapt to women’s expectations and desires, and, as Sarah Ailwood indicates, this willingness to change for a woman was not considered an admirable male trait in the Romantic era (142). Female desire is validated in *Pride and Prejudice*, as it is the motivating force behind Darcy’s transformation and adaptation to Elizabeth’s expectations of him as a man (142). After Darcy’s humiliating first proposal, Elizabeth thanks him for sparing her “the concern which [she] might have felt in refusing [him], had [he] behaved in a more gentle-man like manner” (Austen 148); for all his wealth,

education, and social importance, Darcy is not a true man in Elizabeth's eyes at this point because he lacks manners and morals. Her comment, however, inspires a complete personality change in him, and for the first time in his life, he sees what his character is lacking. Her questioning of his masculinity haunts him even more than her rejection of his affections, and at his second proposal, he confesses that "the recollection of what I then said, of my conduct, my manners...is now...inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget" (281). His love for her inspires him to mould himself to what Elizabeth desires in a partner: manners, good sense, liveliness, and compassion. He responds to the woman he loves, an arguably very modern ability to be found in a nineteenth-century man. Moreover, Darcy fully credits Elizabeth with his epiphany regarding his formerly atrocious behaviour, and it is through her that he is "properly humbled" (Austen 282). Sexualisation by women does not threaten his masculinity; rather, it allows him to realize the wants of his lover and adapt to her needs. Though the female gaze in *Pride and Prejudice* often results in the objectification of men, it also acts as a medium through which masculinity is negotiated and modernized. The masculinity that Darcy ultimately embraces is the one that fully satisfies Elizabeth.

#### CONCLUSION: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY'S NEW MAN

Jane Austen's subtle yet progressive depictions of men reflect the renegotiations of masculinity that were occurring in the intellectual circles of post-French Revolution Europe. Clearly, Austen did not follow the example of many of her female literary contemporaries and create male characters who are static and predictable, serving only to test her heroines. Rather, in creating her heroes, Austen accommodates the masculine

ideals prescribed by figures such as Wollstonecraft and Burke, while also creating a brand of masculinity that is uniquely hers. In addition to being fiercely loyal to and protective of the woman he loves, he is also fully capable of expressing his feelings adequately and poignantly, and his letter continues to woo not only Elizabeth, but also generations of readers of *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy, however, is also mentally and physically formidable, and perpetually reasonable; unlike George Wickham or Mr. Collins, he is never silly, melancholic, or insincere.

Furthermore, by exploiting the sexual power of the female gaze, Austen develops a masculinity in *Pride and Prejudice* that is undeniably modern. The arguments of critics such as Laura Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan, and John Berger are complicated and challenged when applied to Austen's novels. Her female characters, such as Caroline Bingley, prove that women are not necessarily rendered mute and inert by the male gaze. They actively shape and respond to male desire, wielding as much sexual power as men.

More importantly, however, by employing multiple levels of female perspectives in her narratives, Austen proves that the female gaze does indeed exist, and that it encompasses as much authority and power as the male gaze. Emphasizing the importance of spectacle in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, and acknowledging the performative nature of sexuality—another undeniably modern aspect of her novels—Austen presents men who are *made* by her women. Through her gaze, Elizabeth Bennet achieves emotional and sexual equality with Darcy; never passive, she moulds her lover according to her own needs and wants. Masculinity in Austen's novels is subsequently flexible and dynamic; Darcy is powerful, sexual, and sensitive, but, most importantly, looking for a marriage of equals. Austen effectively rewrites masculinity over the course

of her writing career, and her new “Men of Feeling” simultaneously accommodate and amend eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender prescriptions. Moreover, they anticipate—and, in some cases, outright defy—twenty-first-century expectations of what men “ought to be.”

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