



Practising the Virtues of Amiability and Civility in *Pride and Prejudice*

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[T]HERE IS PERHAPS NO ONE of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as *Pride*. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself.” I’m quoting Benjamin Franklin, from his *Autobiography*, first published in 1793. He concludes this passage, famously, by saying that “even if I could conceive that I had compleatly overcome it, I should probably by [be] proud of my Humility” (160). Franklin’s approach to the virtues was systematic: “I conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (24). Notice that he intends to *arrive* at moral perfection, not simply to strive for it—a rather proud statement, I think. He lists twelve virtues that he intends to achieve, adding a thirteenth—“Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates” (150)—when a Quaker friend suggests to him that he is “generally thought proud” (158), and he implements a scheme of focusing on one virtue per week, examining his conduct at the end of every day and recording it in a notebook in order to gauge his success in attaining each of his ideal virtues.

Like Franklin, George Washington had his own set of rules to follow, 110 of them, in fact. When he was a teenager, he copied into

a notebook a set of rules derived from a sixteenth-century French Jesuit compilation entitled *Decency of Conversation Among Men*. Recently edited by Richard Brookhiser and published under the title *Rules of Civility*, Washington's guidelines focus on etiquette and manners, though Brookhiser points out that they do address moral issues indirectly (9). They deal with appropriate language, dress, table manners, grooming, and conduct, and most of them can be summed up by the first rule, that "Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those that are present."

The late eighteenth century produced countless conduct books, each with its own list of rules for manners, etiquette, and civility, and many of them, including Dr. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) and Dr. John Gregory's *Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), focusing specifically on moral advice for women. Many novelists, such as Elizabeth Inchbald and Anne Radcliffe, for example, also explored female virtue. Most writers suggested that a woman's virtue was directly linked to her attractiveness to men: virtue was gendered, and the virtue of women was simplified from the moral pursuit of the good life to the pleasant manners and sexual purity that made women polite and acceptable to society. The virtue of men, too, was seen more as a matter of manners than of the philosophical desire for the good.

Franklin and Washington both attempted to follow rules that would make them civil and amiable, with the idea that virtue rewarded meant material success. Alasdair MacIntyre says that for Franklin, "[t]he end to which the cultivation of the virtues ministers is happiness, but happiness understood as success, prosperity in Philadelphia and ultimately in heaven" (185). This utilitarian idea of virtue is founded on strict codes of conduct, just as Fordyce's and Gregory's rules for women are intended as guidelines for good behavior—follow these rules and they will make you good, and you will be rewarded. But virtue just isn't that simple. While it isn't necessarily easy to follow the rules in these books, it is much harder to use one's own judgment, to determine how virtue might best be practised in a specific situation. The rules of virtue are Mary Bennet's kind of morality—what Jane Austen calls "thread-bare morality" (60). In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* Marilyn Butler argues that "Austen is conservative in a sense no longer current. Her morality is

preconceived and inflexible” (298). But I don’t think Austen’s morality is strict, inflexible, or threadbare. What I’m interested in, and what I think *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies nicely, is Austen’s representation of the way that virtues are something that must be practised—it’s a process of practising, revising, and even improvising the virtuous life, not a preconceived method by which one arrives, as Franklin would have it, at perfect moral behavior.

In his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that by the time Jane Austen was writing, “Aristotelian or Christian teleology” was replaced “by a definition of the virtues in terms of the passions”; that is, virtue was not so much an ideal to which people aspired because it was good in itself, as a method and means of avoiding giving in to the passions. Benjamin Franklin focused more on avoiding the Passion of Pride than on trying to be humble. MacIntyre suggests that “the central problems of moral philosophy come to cluster around the question ‘How do we know which rules to follow?’” (236).

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), published when Austen was 17, Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes the rule-oriented version of virtue in literature, which invariably applies to sexual virtue:

For, in treating of morals, particularly when women are alluded to, writers have too often considered virtue in a very limited sense, and have made the foundation of it *solely* worldly utility; nay, a still more fragile base has been given to this stupendous fabric, and the wayward fluctuating feelings of men have been made the standard of virtue. Yes, virtue as well as religion has been subjected to the decisions of taste. (168-69)

Despite the tendency of writers and society to characterize virtue in this monolithic way, there is in fact not one (sexual) virtue, but many virtues. Wollstonecraft rightly complains that even when the existence of other virtues in women is acknowledged or encouraged, they are the passive virtues of patience, docility, good humor, gentleness, and what she calls “spaniel-like affection” (150; 118). One of the key points of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* is this: that “whilst women are educated to rely on their husbands for judgment [womansh follies and weakness] must ever be the consequence, for there is no improving an understanding by halves, nor can any being act

wisely from imitation, because in every circumstance of life there is a kind of individuality, which requires an exertion of judgment to modify general rules" (305). Following the rules means relying on the judgment of others—whether it's husbands or the writers of conduct books—slavishly imitating models of virtue, rather than judging for one's self. Practising the virtues, on the other hand, means negotiating situations as individual cases, judging how best to act in those circumstances. This does not mean that the virtues are relative or changeable, but they are flexible: they are principles rather than rules. And in order to practise these principles rightly, one must be educated, so Wollstonecraft's main point is that women must be educated in order to be virtuous.

If the tradition of the virtues involves more than just chastity and passivity, what are those other virtues? What is available to Austen as a source for a fuller exploration of the meaning of virtue in *Pride and Prejudice*? I think she draws on both the classical and the biblical (cardinal and theological) traditions of the virtues. Focusing on Aristotle's definition of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I shall trace how Austen works out the social virtues of amiability and civility in *Pride and Prejudice*, within the classical tradition. Both MacIntyre and Gilbert Ryle identify Austen as an Aristotelian. Ryle contrasts her with moralists of the Calvinist variety, who see people as saints or sinners, and says that Austen instead uses "the Aristotelian pattern of ethical ideas [which] represents people as different from one another in degree and not in kind" (115); he traces Austen's Aristotelianism to the influence of Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713), author of an *Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699), who, he says, "had opened a window through which a relatively few people in the eighteenth century inhaled some air with Aristotelian oxygen in it" (122). Although Austen probably didn't read Aristotle, she may have read Shaftesbury, as Ryle speculates, and she most likely learned Aristotelianism from Samuel Johnson as well. Richard Whately in an 1821 review of Austen's novels concluded, "We know not whether Miss Austin [sic] ever had access to the precepts of Aristotle; but there are few, if any, writers of fiction who have illustrated them more successfully" (360). Presumably Whately is referring to Aristotle's *Poetics*, as he discusses Austen's command of action and probability, but I would argue that she seems very much aware of the principles of the *Ethics* as well.

Aristotle defines the virtues as dispositions, or states of character, rather than feelings or faculties, and he stresses that they are “in our power” and “voluntary” (1113b), and that “the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them” (1103a). We tend to think of virtues and vices as pairs of opposites, as, for example, Hope and Despair, Justice and Injustice, Love and Hate. Franklin’s projected book on the *Art of Virtue* (never published) would have included, he says, “a little Comment on each Virtue, in which I would have shown the Advantages of possessing it, and the Mischiefs attending its opposite Vice” (157). Aristotle says, however, that each virtue has more than one opposite. In his well-known doctrine of the mean, each virtue has its excessive form and its defective form. The virtue is the intermediate, perfect state. The reason we fall into seeing opposites is that one of the opposites is more common to human nature than the other.

Thus, Aristotle reasons, “fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue” (1106b). Excess and defect are both failures, and the virtue is success; there are many ways of failing, but only one way of acting rightly. To be good, therefore, Aristotle admits, “is no easy task. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle” (1109a). He compares it to trying to determine the center of a circle: the mean is the center point, and thus is limited; the varieties of excess and defect surrounding the mean are unlimited.

In the *Ethics* Aristotle includes the moral virtues of courage, temperance, liberality, munificence, pride, ambition, good temper, and justice; with the intellectual virtues of scientific knowledge, art, practical wisdom, intuitive reason, theoretical wisdom, sound deliberation, understanding, and judgment; and with the social virtues of amiability, ready wit, and truthfulness. Many of these are relevant to Austen’s novels, and it would be interesting to look at Aristotle’s idea of pride as a virtue in relation to Mr. Darcy’s notion of proper pride being “under good regulation,” but for now I shall focus on the relation of civility and amiability within the category of social virtue. Amiability is an especially interesting virtue because Aristotle says

he has no name for it—there was no Greek word for it, and so he says it resembles friendship. Some translations of the *Ethics* now offer “amiability,” a word that is very familiar to readers of Austen’s novels. The excess of amiability, according to Aristotle, is obsequiousness, sometimes accompanied by self-serving motives, and the defect is cantankerousness, churlishness, or contentiousness (1126b).

The obvious place to begin, then, is with Mr. Collins. He is insufferably obsequious, and his attempts at civility are excessive, as his confession to Mr. Bennet about his habit of “arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions” suggests (68). Far from offering compliments that occur to him naturally in social situations, he contrives stock phrases to offer up, much like Hallmark verses kept in readiness for any emotional occasion. (Though I should grant him the fact that at least he composes them himself. The reason he looks so foolish here is not so much that he studies in preparation for delivering compliments, as that he reveals this, proudly, to another.) This preparation saves him the trouble of actually assessing the abilities or charms of the individual ladies he meets, and ensures that he will never be astonished at the beauty of any one woman. And, as we know, it isn’t the individual woman he thinks of in his schemes of marriage; it is his own happiness. When Elizabeth realizes that his “affections,” such as they are, have been transferred to her, she “observed his increasing civilities toward herself, and heard his frequent attempt at a compliment on her wit and vivacity” (88). His civilities are increasing to excess, and, significantly, it is a repeated attempt at one compliment. The unfortunate Mr. Collins aspires to the virtues of civility and humility, and it would be impossible to say that he falls short of them, for he far exceeds the mean in both cases. So much so, in fact, that Austen describes his walk into Meryton with the Bennet girls as passing “[i]n pompous nothings on his side, and civil assents on that of his cousins” (72). Excessive civility turns into pompous behavior, while the sisters somehow manage to be appropriately civil in response. Civility is to amiability what manners are to morals: ideally the outward manifestation of real goodness, politeness based on respect, tolerance, and understanding.

The defect of amiability, then, involves a lack of manners and understanding, exemplified by Lady Catherine’s cantankerous

behavior and interference in the business of those around her. At Rosings in conversation with Elizabeth—really more of an interview than a real conversation—she is always exclaiming, one imagines, quite loudly, at the answers Elizabeth makes to her intrusive questions: “Five daughters brought up at home without a governess!—I never heard of such a thing” (164); “All!—What, all five out at once? Very odd!—And you only the second.—The younger ones out before the elder are married!” (165). At cards, “Lady Catherine was generally speaking—stating the mistakes of the three others, or relating some anecdote of herself” (166). She does not aspire even to the most basic civilities of conversation, instead criticizing other people without the least attempt to understand or respect them. She and Mr. Collins are indeed opposites, but neither is anywhere near virtue.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are often singled out as a rare example of the happily married couple, at ease with each other, their family, and their relations in society—whatever Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst may think of their position—and they will serve as a good illustration of the mean, the center at which the virtue of amiability may be found. They fulfill Aristotle’s criterion for true amiability, which is that they “behave alike towards those [they know] and those [they do] not know, towards intimates and those who are not so.” Aristotle specifies that “in each of these cases” the virtuous person “will behave as is befitting; for it is not proper to have the same care for intimates and for strangers” (1126b). The civil behavior of the Gardiners to their relatives and to strangers is founded on a complex understanding of human nature; by offering respect and politeness to all, they leave open the possibility that even those who appear undeserving may turn out to be better than they seem, as Darcy in fact does. As Susan Morgan has argued, decorum can provide “a way of seeing and acting toward others which allows for them the possibility of becoming more than our understanding of them” (203). This way of approaching others is difficult—something that can be learned only through practice.

The virtue of amiability is complicated for Mr. Darcy: his problem, as he himself describes it, is that he doesn’t have “the talent which some people possess . . . of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or

appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done” (175). Elizabeth, describing her own performance at the piano, implies that like her, he doesn’t “take the trouble of practising” (175). Soon after this conversation, Elizabeth herself is called on to do what Marianne Dashwood calls “practising the civilities,” as Lady Catherine makes comments on Elizabeth’s piano-playing, “mixing with them many instructions on execution and taste”; Austen says “Elizabeth received them with all the forbearance of civility” (176). Civility has a lot to do with decorum, with maintaining social niceties even when one does not feel like being polite, but its practice is also closely related to morality. By not responding rudely to Lady Catherine, Elizabeth is not merely doing what Mr. Collins asks her to when he tells her to dress simply because Lady Catherine “likes to have the distinction of rank preserved” (161). That would be following the rules. Instead, by forbearing with the incivility of others, she learns to practise and preserve her own amiability.

The crucial moment in which the civility and amiability of both Darcy and Elizabeth are tested is the first proposal scene. When Darcy finds his proposal rejected, he accuses Elizabeth of incivility: “I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little *endeavour* at civility, I am thus rejected” (190). Struggling for composure despite his anger, he feels that she has been rude in saying that if she “could *feel* gratitude,” she would thank him. But of course she cannot feel it, and so she chooses not to pretend that she is grateful for his affections. Despite the fact that he will soon explain his own behavior and his struggles over his regard for her by avowing that “disguise of every sort is my abhorrence” (192), he does seem to wish that she had disguised her frank statement that she cannot feel obligation or gratitude. This is where the virtues get really interesting. It just isn’t possible to practise all the virtues at the same time, which is why it certainly wouldn’t be possible to follow all the rules. In Aristotle’s conception of virtue, there are often situations in which the virtues compete with one another, and that is exactly what happens to both Elizabeth and Darcy in this scene. Both attempt to be civil: despite losing “all compassion in anger” when Darcy first speaks of the inferiority of her position, Elizabeth “tried, however, to compose herself to answer him with patience, when he should have done”

(189). Darcy likewise becomes “pale with anger,” yet he speaks “in a voice of forced calmness” and “with assumed tranquillity” (190-91).

But in spite of their efforts at first to be, or at least to seem, civil, the virtue of amiability comes into direct conflict with the virtue of truthfulness. Neither likes to lie; thus, under pressure they tell each other the truth, Darcy that he loves her even though her relations are inferior, and Elizabeth that she cannot feel gratitude and therefore cannot even thank him for his proposal. And Elizabeth, when he accuses her of incivility, counters with her own implied accusation: by asking, “Why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character?” she argues that he transgressed against civility first, and so she feels justified in asking “Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I *was* uncivil?” (190). When she seeks an excuse for her own reaction, she is not simply searching for something that will explain her transgression against a rule of virtue, a code of conduct, but she is reaching for a tradition in which the virtue of civility exists in tension with the virtue of honesty.

In this scene, neither character can exist for long within that tension, and both are overcome by anger. But anger is not necessarily a vice. It is important that they struggle not with politeness as it is tested against the temptation to become rude or angry, but they wrestle first with two competing virtues, amiability and truthfulness, before they become truly angry. It is hard to be virtuous, but it is surely even harder when the virtues won't exist equally and simultaneously. The outbursts of honesty and anger that follow are brief but powerful. With respect to anger, Aristotle calls the excessive form irascibility or revengefulness, and says that the deficiency has no real name, but the right disposition is something like patience, or good temper. He says, “The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised” (1125b). Neither Elizabeth nor Darcy gives in to anger completely, as they reveal, honestly, why they are angry, and yet they are both trying to be patient and civil. Elizabeth again tries “to the utmost to speak with composure” (192) and Darcy leaves her, with “incredulity and mortification,” true, but with civil

parting words: “Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness” (193). The apology may be narrow — he doesn’t apologize for anything he has said or for injuring her feelings, but his wish for her welfare shows that he can pay attention to what is apart from himself.

It is not until Elizabeth and the Gardiners meet him at Pemberley that Darcy begins to demonstrate that he is learning to practise the virtue of amiability. Elizabeth is surprised that he wishes to be introduced to her uncle and aunt — “[t]his was a stroke of civility for which she was quite unprepared” (254)—and yet she then hears him invite her uncle, “with the greatest civility, to fish there as often as he chose” (255). Darcy is practising civility even towards those he does not know — this is in sharp contrast to his remarks on his first meeting with Elizabeth. While Mr. Gardiner suspects that “perhaps he may be a little whimsical in his civilities,” Elizabeth explains to them that Darcy’s “character was by no means so faulty, nor Wickham’s so amiable, as they had been considered in Hertfordshire” (258).

Wickham’s manners, his civil behavior and pleasing address, convinced many that he was amiable; Darcy’s manners, on the other hand, convinced many that he was guilty of pride, conceit, and even perhaps cantankerousness. So far I have treated civility and amiability as if they were more or less interchangeable, but at this point I want to make a distinction between them. Wickham’s character demonstrates that it is possible to be civil without being truly amiable. The civilities, then, are lesser virtues; though it is still possible to behave in excess or defect of the virtue of civility, this virtue is more a matter of form. Even Miss Bingley can be civil, though hers is often described as “cold civility” (42). Politeness and etiquette may reflect an amiable character and a complex moral life, but they clearly cannot substitute for it. Here the civilities are more like a set of rules to follow, rules that may give the appearance of goodness, and may contribute to the preservation of decorum, but which in isolation from other virtues can be dangerous.

The virtues in Austen’s world are not simply a set of rules, and yet they do exist together in a kind of community of virtue. To be truly virtuous, civility must be accompanied by genuine amiability (which Wickham does not have) and amiability must be exhibited

through the forms of civility (which Darcy learns). Virtues may be thrown into competition with each other (as Elizabeth and Darcy discover when they try to uphold the virtues of civility, honesty, and patience), but although they can't always co-exist peacefully and simultaneously, the virtues certainly can't exist independently of one another.

Jane Austen's way of working out the virtues in *Pride and Prejudice* is, I think, Aristotelian. Virtue for her involves the flexible practice of dealing with the excesses and the defects of behavior, with competing virtues, and with the dependence of one virtue on another. This kind of practice involves the exercise of intellect and understanding; it is the kind of virtue of which Mary Wollstonecraft would approve as it requires what she calls the "exertion of . . . judgment to modify general rules" (305). It is quite unlike the "threadbare morality" of Mary Bennet, and it is not inflexible. *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned with the difference between following the rules of polite behavior and learning how to balance actions in order to find the right way to practise the range of the virtues. Although I have just begun to outline the way these virtues are learned and practised in Austen's novels, I think Alasdair MacIntyre is probably right that she is "the last great effective imaginative representative of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues" (223), in that she engages fully with classical and biblical tradition, exploring how best to negotiate this practice in a world more interested in rules than in understanding. Virtue for Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* is not an easy conservative morality, but a radical process of practising good judgment.¹

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