



“Disarming Reproof”:  
*Pride and Prejudice* and  
the Power of Criticism

PRISCILLA GILMAN

Priscilla Gilman is an assistant professor of English at Yale University. She is currently at work on a manuscript entitled “*Beyond the Power of Criticism*”: *Authorial Invulnerability in Later Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Literature*.

IN 1811, TWO YEARS BEFORE *Pride and Prejudice* appeared, the British author and critic Josiah Conder published *Reviewers Reviewed*, a pamphlet documenting the newly powerful influence of literary criticism:

Criticism has of late years been gradually assuming a new character. It is no longer the study or the pastime of a few. Its dominion is no longer confined to the speculative regions of taste, and scholastic learning: but a new power has sprung up under this name, whose pretensions embrace all the various subjects of human opinion, and whose influence is felt in a greater or less degree through all the orders of society. (Ferris 26-7)

Conder here attests a widespread cultural phenomenon. Over the second half of the eighteenth century, critical reading had become professionalized and institutionalized in major review journals as *the* system of determining the value of literary works. In addition, the now vast reading public begins to read criticism along with, and even instead of, literature, and critics increasingly mediate between writers and readers. They direct the reading process. They influence purchasing decisions. By the time that Austen is writing and beginning to publish, critics are, as Byron put it, the “monarch-makers in poetry and prose” (Byron, *Letters* III 209). *Blackwood’s Magazine*,

one of the leading literary periodicals of the day, described the early nineteenth century as “the most critical age ever the world produced” (206), and one year before *Pride and Prejudice* was published, Byron declared, “This is the age of Criticism.”

For the first time, in a massive sense, criticism seems to be everywhere, and writers felt the need to take account of it. Fanny Burney actually dedicates *Evelina* to the editors of the *Monthly and Critical Reviews*, and Wordsworth adds increasingly lengthy prefaces to *Lyrical Ballads* in an attempt to shape the volume’s reception. Harsh reviews of her poem “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” in that same year ended Anna Barbauld’s career as a writer, and Keats is famously “snuffed out by an article,” killed, as Shelley imagines it, by “the savage criticism on his *Endymion*.”<sup>1</sup> One would expect Jane Austen, writing at the peak of this development, to react to criticism in some overt way. But in fact, Austen demonstrates remarkably little obvious concern for criticism. Unlike her contemporaries, Austen doesn’t refer to reviews or criticism in her letters, and perhaps most notably, she doesn’t use all the conventional devices for defending one’s work—epigraphs, dedications, prefaces, introductions, footnotes—all are conspicuously absent from Austen’s major novels, with a very few exceptions.<sup>2</sup> This lack of framing devices, or what the French critic Gerard Genette has called paratext, is especially remarkable in the work of a female author. Because they seemed especially vulnerable to the power of disapproving male critics, women authors resorted more frequently to framing devices, in particular to what two critics have called the “pleading preface” (Thompson and Ahrens), which provided them with a space to apologize for and defend their venturing into print and to solicit approbation for their work.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in the age of criticism, Austen seems unconcerned. And yet as we all know, Austen’s novels are in another sense about nothing but criticism. Just to look at the titles—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*—is to see this, to appreciate just how finely tuned to critical judgment Austen is. Unlike most of her contemporaries, Austen rarely discusses reviewers directly, either privately or publicly (the defense of novels in *Northanger Abbey* being the significant exception), but her novels, and especially *Pride and Prejudice*, center on the relationship between those who judge and

those who are judged. What I want to suggest is that these kinds of attention to criticism are in fact linked, and that *Pride and Prejudice*, far from suppressing concern with the tumultuous world of book publishing and reviewing, offers an extended analysis, indeed critique, of the practice of criticism that has very specific implications for the author-critic relationship. I will further argue that in its critique of attempts to get beyond criticism's power, *Pride and Prejudice* helps us to understand why Austen refrains from overt statements about criticism and from employing conventional strategies for "dis-arm[ing] reproof" (48).

Jan Fergus has described *Pride and Prejudice* as a "didactic comedy of judgment, a comedy which implicates and educates the reader's critical judgment while relentlessly poking fun at it" (*Didactic Novel* 90). *Pride and Prejudice* indeed depicts a universe of criticism. Criticism is in many ways the main principle of behavior, and everyone seems to be a critic. In the course of the novel, bodies, faces, manners, conversations, musical performances, letters, and characters are all evaluated and judged. No one is immune—almost every character at some point finds himself or herself in the position of both critic and criticized. Critics in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth included, are relentlessly satirized for their prejudice, conventionality, rigidity, fallibility, hypocrisy, arrogance, and maliciousness. Austen exposes the flawed, suspect, and problematic motivations behind supposedly neutral critical pronouncements, and reveals problems with criticism both epistemological and ethical.

Austen's critique of critics functions as a defense against literary critics; *Pride and Prejudice* defends itself from criticism by satirizing it. In providing this commentary on the limits of criticism's penetration, Austen undermines the accuracy and authority of local critical judgments, their ability to be finally true. She reminds her readers of the necessity of independent judgment, and how no one judgment can provide a comprehensive assessment, a definitive verdict. Moreover, in condemning critics' ethical lapses—the pleasure they take in abusing others, the way that jealousy, snobbery, or the desire for self-aggrandizement often motivates attack—Austen issues a stern warning to potential critics of her own novel. The entire novel, in fact, stands as a kind of *caveat lector* to its critical readers; don't read and judge this novel in the unfair ways that the characters in this novel read and judge each other.

Even as she defends her novel by enacting within it a critique of critics, however, Austen satirizes that very quest for invulnerability to criticism. I want to focus on one particularly egregious quester, that most aggressive and assiduous wooer, the “obsequious” (70) Mr. Collins. A “mixture of servility and self-importance” (64), Collins attempts to preempt criticism by anticipating and answering potential objections to his actions, behavior, manner, and speech. He prefaces or footnotes everything he says and does with explanations of his motives and his hopes for and thoughts on how he should be received. In Collins, Austen embodies the very defensiveness—the pleading preface, the explanatory footnote, the servile dedication—that is absent from her own literary work.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Collins could be described as the quintessential man of paratext. Here is Gerard Genette:

[The paratext] constitutes, between the text and what lies outside of it, a zone not just of transition, but of transaction; the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the public in the service, well or badly understood and accomplished, of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading—more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies. (Genette 261-62)

Collins appears first in the novel as a writer, only later materializing in person, and his first letter to the Bennet family is just such a site of transition and transaction. For both the Bennets and the reader, the letter’s style is far more revealing than any information that it contains. The following excerpt perfectly represents Collins himself:

I flatter myself that my present overtures of good-will are highly commendable, and that the circumstances of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate, will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch. I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends. (63)

Of interest here is how Collins couches the inconvenient advantage of his inheritance in language whose blandishments and apologies become the point of his expression. His “being next in the entail” is



significant, but of clearly greater importance to him and to Austen is the impression he seeks to make by surrounding this fact with framing flatteries.

And this is a consistent feature of his self-presentation. After Elizabeth has rejected his marriage proposal, Collins bids farewell to the Bennets with a grand declaration of his motives and intentions:

“You will not, I hope, consider me as shewing any disrespect to your family, my dear Madam, by thus withdrawing my pretensions to your daughter’s favour, without having paid yourself and Mr. Bennet the compliment of requesting you to interpose your authority in my behalf. My conduct may I fear be objectionable in having accepted my dismissal from your daughter’s lips instead of your own. But we are all liable to error. I have certainly meant well through the whole affair. . . . [I]f my *manner* has been at all reprehensible, I here beg leave to apologise.” (114)

This is precisely the kind of empty pleading that a critic writing in the *Analytical Review* in 1798 deplored as the scourge of literature: “Every production, whether good or bad, must rest upon its [sic] own merits; apologies therefore, with but very few exceptions, are either impertinent or superfluous.”<sup>5</sup> Collins is of course both of these, both impertinent and superfluous.

And the fact that he comes off so badly in trying to come off so well is strong evidence for Austen’s dislike of defensive or pleading apparatus and goes some way towards explaining why her novels so conspicuously lack it. For it must be said that Collins indeed represents everything that Austen is not. We never catch Austen out in the open, selling her wares. As an early critic of Austen puts it, “The moral lessons of this lady’s novels, though clearly and impressively conveyed, are not offensively put forward . . . they are not forced upon the reader” (Whately 95). Austen appears here as a sort of anti-Collins. It’s Collins, after all, who puts himself forward repeatedly and forces himself upon his listener.

If Collins is an example of a man so overcome by criticism that he becomes, literally, stupid, Elizabeth is an example of how to bear up smartly under its assault. If in Collins Austen offers a figure of everything she’s not vis-à-vis criticism, then in Elizabeth she gives

us her clearest picture of how a proper resistance to criticism might function. Perhaps nowhere is the difference between Collins and Elizabeth more apparent than in their opposing attitudes towards that most presumptuous and arrogant of critics, Lady Catherine. For Collins, Lady Catherine “is the sort of woman whom one cannot regard with too much deference” (157). Elizabeth, in contrast, may be “the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with so much dignified impertinence” (166).

It is always surprising to remember that Elizabeth Bennet, perhaps Austen’s most beloved heroine, is also one of the most criticized heroines in all literature, due in large part to her most embarrassing family. She “blushe[s] and blushe[s] again with shame and vexation” (100) and is perpetually in “agonies” (100) at the vulgar and inappropriate behavior of her mother and sisters, in whose company she must suffer “the silent contempt of the gentlemen . . . [and] the insolent smiles of the ladies” (102). Throughout the novel, she is forced to endure “the ridicule and censure of the ladies both of Netherfield and Rosings” (263).

But it is in relation to Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth is most powerfully, and tellingly, subject to criticism. Mr. Darcy is in many ways the quintessential critic. He “has a very satirical eye” (24), he is “above being pleased” (10), he is “fastidious” (16) and “severe” (56). As Mr. Bennet tells Elizabeth, he “never looks at any woman but to see a blemish” (363), and at first, as the narrator puts it, he observes Elizabeth with “a critical eye” and “look[s] at her only to criticise” (23).

The relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth resembles the one between a male reviewer and a female writer. This is best exemplified in a series of scenes in which Darcy is clearly Elizabeth’s judge: he evaluates her appearance, her conversation, her taste, her musical ability, her dancing, her character. The exchanges between Darcy and Elizabeth in these scenes dramatize the kinds of exchange that occur between critic and author. However, Elizabeth does not behave like a typical author. Austen emphasizes that Elizabeth’s first and most direct means of getting beyond the power of criticism is to internalize that power. Elizabeth is the performer to Darcy’s critic, but she is equally the critic who can show by the greater flexibility or freedom of her intelligence that Darcy’s rule-bound criticism is no less a performance. Elizabeth’s reaction to overhearing Darcy’s ini-

tial negative judgment of her indicates the spirit and wit which she will demonstrate repeatedly when confronted with his critical power. Although she remains “with no very cordial feelings towards him,” she tells “the story . . . with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous” (12). Rather than being crushed or inhibited by criticism, Elizabeth is animated and energized by it. In fact, she defuses the sting of Darcy’s rejection by turning it into narrative, using it as material for a funny story to tell her friends. Criticism makes Elizabeth creative.

Elizabeth also repeatedly critiques the prefatory conventions of self-effacement and self-aggrandizement, the “servility and self-importance” of Mr. Collins. Indeed, she self-consciously employs conventions and techniques for getting beyond criticism’s power while simultaneously sending them up. Noticing that Darcy has been listening to her conversation with Colonel Forster, Elizabeth tells Charlotte: “He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him” (24). She proceeds to ask Darcy for a positive assessment of her performance: “Did not you think, Mr. Darcy, that I expressed myself uncommonly well just now, when I was teasing Colonel Forster to give us a ball at Meryton?” (24). If you are going to eavesdrop on my conversation, Elizabeth implies, you had better be favorably disposed and suitably impressed. After puffing her own performance, Elizabeth then mockingly employs the opposite convention: self-deprecation and flattery of the critic. When Charlotte asks her to play, Elizabeth prefaces her performance by declaring that she “would really rather not sit down before those who must be in the habit of hearing the very best performers” (24). Here, Elizabeth parodies the exaggerated modesty which so commonly colored prefaces of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Elizabeth’s “impertinence” with Darcy turns the criticized into the critic, and it is as critic that she defuses his power and shows herself his equal. Late in the novel, Darcy will acknowledge this: “I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You shewed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased” (369). In this direct way, by matching Darcy’s critical intelligence, Elizabeth equals his power and moves beyond its

belittling influence. But secondly, and more importantly, Elizabeth transcends Darcy's power by showing it insufficient to account for her appeal for him. This supra-critical influence affects Darcy almost from the outset:

Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of his asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness. (23)

Darcy here makes the "mortifying" discovery that his conventional standards cannot accommodate Elizabeth's unusual beauty. He is "forced to acknowledge" her appeal, he is "caught" by her attractive manners. Indeed, throughout the novel, Elizabeth's appeal to Darcy is described as a kind of enchanting, captivating, magical power that try as he might, he simply can't resist: "Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger" (52). That Darcy is "bewitched" suggests the kind of power that Elizabeth is here exerting. Something about Elizabeth overcomes him and he is forced against his will and his principles to admire her.

This is the Elizabeth that critics have called Austen's fantasy of power. Judith Lowder Newton writes that "Real power in *Pride and Prejudice* . . . involves having the intelligence, the wit, and the critical attitudes of Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Bennet . . . is essentially an Austen fantasy, a fantasy of power" (Newton 133), and Claudia Johnson, while disagreeing, summarizes the critical consensus: "In its readiness to ratify and grant our happiness, *Pride and Prejudice* is almost shamelessly wish fulfilling. . . . To some *Pride and Prej-*



*udice* has a markedly fairy-tale-like quality which, while accounting for much of the novel's enduring popular success, is politically suspect" (Johnson 74). Such critics have worried that this fantasy weakens the political force of Austen's feminist argument. But I believe that Austen establishes this final movement of her argument on the level of fantasy in order to make a point about how critical power may finally be overcome. Part of this point, however, is that we do not always know, and can never plan, how we escape criticism's power.

It is important to note in this regard that Elizabeth's strategies for coping with Darcy's critical power are not intended to win him but simply to survive with her self-respect and dignity intact. She does not finally solve the problem of criticism's power. Austen's point is that Elizabeth overcomes Darcy not so much by design as in spite of it. She exceeds the power of his criticism by exceeding the scope of its categories. Austen in fact goes out of her way to emphasize that, from the outset, Elizabeth does not consciously strive to win Darcy and that Darcy's growing attraction to her goes unnoticed: Elizabeth is "far from suspecting that she [is] herself becoming an object of some interest in [Darcy's] . . . eyes," and she is "perfectly unaware" (23) of his growing attraction to her. After Darcy's proposal, Elizabeth thinks to herself "it was gratifying to have inspired unconsciously so strong an affection" (193). Lady Catherine's accusation — "[Y]our arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and to all his family. You may have drawn him in" (354) — is ludicrous. This is precisely what Elizabeth didn't do. She attracted Darcy unconsciously, and her refusal to employ obvious arts and allurements actually enhances her allure.

Elizabeth herself makes this clear when she asks Darcy "to account for his having ever fallen in love with her":

"Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?"

"For the liveliness of your mind, I did."

"You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less. The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused, and

interested you, because I was so unlike them. . . . [I]n your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you. There—I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it; and really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable. To be sure, you knew no actual good of me—but nobody thinks of that when they fall in love.” (380)

On one level, there is obviously much truth to Elizabeth’s account. Her independence makes her all the more appealing. “Civility,” “deference,” “officious attention”—these are the hallmarks of a Collins. But there is another sense in which Elizabeth’s account fails to clarify the source of her appeal to Darcy. Her “accounting” in this passage is emphatically speculative. Darcy himself, moreover, never explicitly agrees with or validates this account of his own motives. In fact, he offers different explanations—her kindness to Jane, for instance. The source of Elizabeth’s attractiveness to Darcy is never made completely clear. So that when Elizabeth says, “I begin to think it perfectly reasonable,” the doubt in her thought clashes with the confidence. The suggestion is that the attractions of love cannot be accounted. And because in being unaccountable these attractions are unlike those that criticism enumerates, they are manifestly in the style of reading that Austen encourages through Elizabeth’s example. The fantastic power that Elizabeth exerts is a power to usurp criticism’s determinations and, in Austen’s covert lesson for her readers, it is an instruction in literary appreciation. In the novel’s concluding fantasies of power and marriage, criticism is false and love is true. Like Elizabeth herself, a great critic but a greater charmer, the work of literature should be allowed to remain unaccountable, inexplicably bewitching. A nineteenth-century reader of Austen confirmed her argument by describing *Pride and Prejudice* in words that derive from Darcy’s captivation by Elizabeth: “The stream of her Tale flows on in an easy, natural, but spring tide, which carries us out of ourselves, and bears our feelings, affections, and deepest interest, irresistably [sic] along with it.”<sup>6</sup>

NOTES

1. Byron makes the remark in *Don Juan* XI. 59, 473-80; Shelley's phrase is from the Preface to "Adonais," his elegy for Keats.
2. *Emma* has a dedication to the Prince Regent that Austen was virtually forced into and *Northanger Abbey* a brief advertisement. "By a Lady" is of course in and of itself a significant gesture.
3. For more on the use of framing devices by female authors, see Jan Fergus, *Cambridge Companion*, 12-14.
4. Austen's juvenilia, however, is filled with parodies of such servile dedications, and the rhetoric of these mock-dedications is strongly echoed in the words of Mr. Collins.
5. *Analytical Review* 27 (April 1798), 418-19.
6. "A Novelist of the Age," extract from an unsigned review of the *Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins*, *Retrospective Review* (no month, 1823), vii, 131-35, reprinted in Southam, *Critical Heritage*, 111.

WORKS CITED

- Analytical Review* 27 (April 1798).
- AUSTEN, JANE. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933.
- Blackwood's Magazine* VII, 1820.
- BYRON, LORD GEORGE. "Don Juan." *Byron: The Oxford Authors*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Oxford: OUP, 1986. 373-879.
- BYRON, LORD GEORGE. *Byron's Letters and Journals*. Ed. Leslie Marchand. Cambridge: Mass.: Belknap Press, 1974.
- FERRIS, INA. *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.
- FERGUS, JAN. *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*. New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1983.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Professional Woman Writer." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster. Cambridge: CUP, 1997, 12-31.
- GENETTE, GERARD. "Introduction to the Paratext." *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 261-72.
- JOHNSON, CLAUDIA L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- NEWTON, JUDITH LOWDER. *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1981.
- SHELLEY, PERCY BYSSHE. Preface to "Adonais." *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. London: Oxford UP, 1965. 430-31.
- SOUTHAM, B. C., ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968.
- THOMPSON, LESLIE M. AND JOHN R. AHRENS. "Criticism of English Fiction 1780-1819: The Mysterious Powers of the Pleading Preface." *Yearbook of English Studies* 1 (1971): 125-34.

WHATELY, RICHARD. "Northanger  
Abbey and Persuasion." *Quarterly  
Review* 24 (January 1821), 352-76.  
Reprinted in *Jane Austen: The  
Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam.  
London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,  
1968.