

The theatre in society

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In *Pride and Prejudice*, society features as an important aspect of every individual's life. Each character is inextricably enmeshed in the web of society, and must perform various roles in accordance with the demands of society. In the comic mode of the novel, society reinforces its continuance by tending toward conformity and the status quo. Characters with personalities not entirely in congruence with the roles demanded of him or her experience a tension between their private and public selves. For example, Darcy and Mr. Bennet choose to adhere to the integrity of their private or "true" selves, and end up compromising their civility. Other characters never experience such a tension, and their behavior does not vary in either public or private settings. It is Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, who achieves the most satisfying balance between fidelity to the integrity of the private self and the civil demands of society – a trait that Darcy must eventually learn in order to gain Elizabeth's respect and love. Mr. Bennet is described by the narrator as a "true philosopher," deriving amusement from others "where other powers of entertainment are wanting." As a complex character incarcerated in a mindless provincial society, Mr. Bennet initially draws less criticism (and less favour) from readers. Twenty years of being acquainted with Mrs. Bennet's nerves are enough for him to be sufficiently "fatigued" of being the husband of a silly, insensible woman. Mr. Bennet indulges in what Irving Goffman calls "role distance" – he employs ironic gestures of detachment in order to sustain the integrity of his private self – a reasonable, intelligent man – and refuses to engage with Mrs. Bennet on a serious, intimate level, using her merely for frivolous entertainment. All Mr. Bennet does is perform the bare minimum of his role as a husband without being motivated by any sincere

emotions. While he does visit Mr. Bingley in order to allow his daughters a chance to become acquainted with such an eligible bachelor, he does so only after constantly “ assuring his wife that he should not go,” amusing himself with her insensible fretting. His disengagement also includes his abdication of sincere parental responsibility: ultimately, it is revealed that he refuses to see Bingley for the sake of “ the astonishment of the ladies.” At these points in the novel, performances lacking individual energy – indeed vacuous adherence to civil proper form – are more or less innocuous and offer merely comic interludes. Elsewhere, however, Austen shows that retreating behind ironic humor and distance can have more serious consequences. When Elizabeth exhorts her father to prevent Lydia from going to Brighton, Mr. Bennet once again retreats behind his wit and performs his paternal role rather badly. Elizabeth, who “ represented to him all the improprieties of Lydia’s general behavior,” attempts to engage his father to respond seriously by speaking of “ general evils” – “ our importance, our respectability in the world, must be affected by the wild volatility, the assurance and disdain of all restraint which mark Lydia’s character.” Mr. Bennet’s response, however, shows that he is not taking Elizabeth seriously – “ What has she frightened away some of your lovers? Poor little Lizzy!” While he is indeed playing the role of the father, such “ concern” has no sincere emotion behind it, and is in fact inappropriate given the subject matter. Despite Elizabeth’s earnest exhortations, Mr. Bennet remains impenetrable as he once again shields himself with his intelligence, fabricating a convenient excuse that “[Lydia’s] being there may teach her her own insignificance.” While logically possible, it is unlikely to occur given Lydia’s “

animal spirits.” Without any emotional energy undergirding his action (or in this case inaction), Mr. Bennet fails to appreciate the full extent of harm which could occur to the whole family. The eventual denouement of the plot vindicates Elizabeth’s frustration and concern, for Lydia ultimately not only fails to learn of her “ insignificance,” she even manages to end up eloping with Wickham, thereby disgracing her entire family. Mr. Darcy, while not so much of a cynic as Mr. Bennet, is nonetheless similarly rational and perhaps idealistic. His principles, while sound, are too rigid and inflexible. “ Disguise of any sort is my abhorrence” – Caroline Bingley cannot gain his good opinion because she is superficial and hypocritical, constantly fawning over Darcy in order to get his attention. As Darcy mentions, “ there is meanness in all the arts which women sometimes employ to captivate men.” Good principles nonetheless have to be reconciled with society. In a novel of manners, deportment is what is visible on the social scene. Yet in every social setting roles have to be played. Darcy is, despite his tendencies, unable to fully appreciate the need for role-playing – the key factor to sustaining social interaction. The private self cannot be expected to be fully represented in any one public setting. He slights Elizabeth at the ball and refuses to dance because he has no intention of forming lasting attachments with any one of them. He refuses to acquiesce to the social courtesies of dancing (especially when men are scarce) which would entail a compromise of his true self – the part of him which has not a modicum of desire to become acquainted with any of the girls. Dancing without emotional intent would constitute “ disguise,” which is, to him, nothing less than odiously hypocritical. Fortunately, however, Elizabeth manages to influence him by

the end of the novel. She accuses him of never behaving in a “ gentleman-like manner,” a piece of criticism with which Darcy admits to have “ tormented” him. Toward the end of the novel he is able to, like Elizabeth, “ unite civility and truth” by committing individual energy, thought and emotion into the forms of civility, conferring meaning upon them in a way that empty individuals like Mrs. Bennet cannot. Their civility remains merely empty form.” My object then...was to shew you, by every civility in my power, that I was not so mean as to resent the past”: Darcy has come to use civility – the performance – to express himself. The performing and the reflecting self are hence harmonized. Previously, he looked contemptuously at Mr. Collins’ obsequious manner with an expression of “ unrestrained wonder” and remained aloof to Sir William’s attempts at conversation. He no longer sees holding back his true (and justified) thoughts about them as acts of hypocrisy, but rather appreciates them as necessary performances to be played in a civil society. Eventually he comes to bear Collins’ sycophantic manner with “ admirable calmness” and “ shrug[s] his shoulders” only when Sir William is out of sight. Elizabeth represents the most satisfying union of performance and integrity. She possesses wit like Mr. Bennet, though none of his cynicism, and like Darcy holds the integrity of the self over outward form. Therefore, she never dissolves into the roles she plays. She refuses to submit to Mrs. Bennet’s demands to marry Mr. Collins and play the role of a woman in an androcentric society who marries for economic and social stability; she refuses to play the role of a fawning lover when the very rich Darcy first proposes to her; she also refuses to accept the role of an intimidated social inferior when Lady Catherine comes to impose her

imperious authority on her. Her irony and wit allow her greater expression in her performances than Darcy – essentially, with her sense of irony she is capable of saying the opposite of what she means, and capable of keeping civil form whilst expressing herself to others who share her values and are hence able to catch the true intent of her ironic words. Initially she occasionally slips into self-indulgent irony – a trait she inherited from her father. “ Mr. Darcy is all politeness” she says. Darcy, at this point, is unaware of her intense dislike of him, and William Lucas, who is also at the scene, similarly misunderstands her words. Like Mr. Bennet, she ends up delighting in private expression, humoring herself rather than communicating anything sincere to anyone. Nonetheless, Elizabeth’s liveliness secures her wit by the end of the novel, where she parodies the behavior of conventional lovers with Darcy (“ To be sure, you knew no actual good of me – but nobody thinks of that when they fall in love”), using irony to establish the fact that she is aware of the limitations of conventional romantic love to a Darcy who is now capable of understanding her (“ Was there no good in your affectionate behavior to Jane while she was ill at Netherfield?”). Elizabeth simultaneously indulges in the performance of blissful lovers while delighting in the very limitations of the performance.