

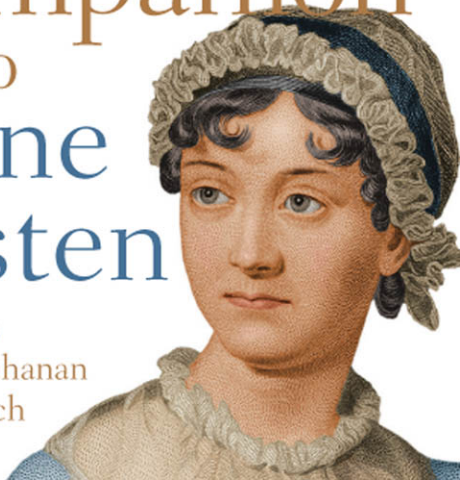


A BOOK OF SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

The Bedside, 
 Bathtub &
Armchair
Companion
to
Jane
Austen

Carol Adams
Douglas Buchanan
& Kelly Gesch



The Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair
Companion to Jane Austen

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*For Evander Lomke,
a reader for readers*

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First Impressions: Letting Jane Austen Into Your Life



“Where shall I begin? Which of all my important nothings shall I tell you first?” So Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1808. But she did not write “important nothings,” she wrote wonderful letters (and the letter of that 1808 day is such an example), and even more wonderful novels. Her dilemma, “where shall I begin?” is ours as well. Where to begin to describe this beloved author and her beloved works?

Of course, everyone has first impressions when meeting a novel or the author. Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges describes Jane Austen as “fair and handsome, slight and elegant, but with cheeks a little too full.” He never suspected “she was an authoress.”

And what of the poet W. H. Auden? He wrote:

*You could not shock her more than she
shocks me;*

*Beside her Joyce seems innocent as
grass.*

It makes me most uncomfortable to see

*An English spinster of the middle
class*

*Describe the amorous effects of
“brass,”*

Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety

The economic basis of society.

And then there was Kipling. For Kipling’s characters in “The Janeites” on the Somme Front during World War I, it seemed entirely appropriate to name guns “General Tilney” and “The Lady Catherine de Bugg.”

Austen consoles the lonely, makes happy the care-worn, and spreads joy and delight wherever she is read. We may cringe when Elizabeth misreads Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* (and recognize that in that moment she is definitely her mother’s daughter). We either completely understand Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* or are absolutely impatient with her. But it doesn’t matter: We trust Jane Austen to take us through a thicket of thorns, pricking us with anxiety felt over missed opportunities, only

to return us safely home with our baskets filled with berries, like the strawberry pickers at Donwell Abbey.

Perhaps we are new to Jane Austen—having seen a movie or ten—and we want to get a little closer. Who is this Jane Austen? How did she write such wonderful novels? Why do so many people love her novels so? What did she really say?

The Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Jane Austen has something for everyone: The newcomer can learn about Austen’s life and her novels, about themes in the books, and their translations into film. Janeites and other Jane-readers and Jane-addicts can test their knowledge with our quiz, and learn along the way, too. There’s some fun and there’s some elucidation. (Just enough of both, we hope!)

As with all books in this series, we provide “Capsules” of the novels, but don’t worry—in the capsules—we don’t give away the “happily ever afters,” nor identify for whom such things do not come to pass. And for those who know the plots, the capsules may introduce new ideas about the books and their themes. Yes, we know the movies have been watched, and re-watched and for some of you, the books are reread every decade (if not yearly). But for those who come to this book wanting to know about Jane Austen and who have not read her novels, we don’t betray her plots in the capsules. How fortunate you are! How we envy the person who is opening *Emma* or *Pride and Prejudice* for the first time. Read her. Read her again. Keep her by your bedside, near your bathtub, and tucked into your armchair.



CAPSULE

Pride and Prejudice



If any of the families in Jane Austen were to be the characters in a dysfunctional evening sitcom, it would be the Bennets of Longbourn. There is Mr. Bennet, whose biting sarcasm wears thin the nerves of his wife, and whose nerves are in turn tried by his younger daughters. Mrs. Bennet is obsessed (understandably) with finding husbands for her children Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Lydia, and Kitty. Jane is sensible and even-tempered; Elizabeth, independent and loyal, the favorite of her father; Mary, bookish, yet unwise in many things; and Lydia and Kitty, forever hounding young officers and new fashions. In short, the makings of Georgian family chaos.



In Pride and Prejudice, we first meet Elizabeth Bennet working on the trimming of a hat. This hat was designed for the 1995 BBC/A&E Pride and Prejudice. Courtesy of Baronda Ellen Bradley.

Since *Pride and Prejudice* is probably the most reread book in English, everyone knows that our sitcom begins when it is found out that Netherfield Park, the manor house three miles away, has been let by one Mr. Bingley. For Mrs. Bennet, the obvious course of action is to ensure her daughters receive due consideration in the race to matrimony. Mrs. Bennet's mind is seldom without connubial machinations: meetings and dances, plans and positioning—they are all directed toward marrying off one or another of her daughters.

While Mrs. Bennet is busy plotting marriages, the novel known for its “marriage plot” actually explores much different territory on its way to either please or disappoint Mrs. Bennet. *Pride and Prejudice* is as much about the education of a young woman—not book-learning education, not the education that is discussed one night at Netherfield, when Miss Bingley, wooing Darcy by mirroring what she believes to be his opinions, proposes, “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word [*accomplished*].” No, Lizzy's will be another education altogether.

Into every sitcom, some drama must come. The crisis that undergirds the novel, and that causes ongoing consternation to Mrs. Bennet, is that the Longbourn estate is entailed to a distant

relative. Entailment ties up a landed estate for a generation ahead; so that the current owner is actually only a tenant for life, and thus has limited powers. Entailing an estate provided continuity of ownership of property. The tenant for life can't dispose of the estate. Through a will, the estate is left to the first male heir, but it is entailed on the heir's son. The heir's son becomes the heir "in tail."

The assumption of an entail is that the person who gains the estate from the dictates of the entail will do the same thing—granting to his son only life tenancy, and entailing it to the first son of his first son, thus guaranteeing the property stays in the hands of the family for two more generations. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet expected to have a son, and when he turned twenty-one, they were going to break the entail, to provide for Mrs. Bennet and the younger children. But after five daughters, and no son, the situation of the mother and the daughters was very unstable. Mrs. Bennet is not far wrong that with the death of Mr. Bennet, Mr. Collins (upon whom the estate becomes entailed as there were no sons) could toss them out. Despite Mrs. Bennet's poignant exclamations about her fate, because her character is so nervous and shallow, the depth of the critique of entailment may not be felt. It is left to the unpleasant and imperious Lady Catherine to voice the all-important position that there is "no occasion for entailing estates from the female lines." Such beliefs will not save the Bennet girls from being dispossessed.

Strangers and Journeys

The novelist John Gardner proposed that there are two basic story lines in a novel:

a stranger comes to town or someone goes on a journey. Elizabeth Bennet, bright, articulate, sassy, sparkling, is the fortunate person to whom both of these things happen multiple times: three strangers (Darcy, Collins, Wickham) and two trips (to Charlotte in the spring, to Derbyshire in the summer). Largely told from Elizabeth's perspective, *Pride and Prejudice* shows us how she learns to evaluate information from a variety of quarters: personal experience, confidences shared by loved ones and strangers, and observations at home and as she travels. It turns out that when it comes to what makes a woman accomplished—and interesting to Mr. Darcy—Miss Bingley was wrong on many counts.



Yes, a love story is injected into this awakening of insight, a love story that is ignited by bad first impressions and whose flame is fed by misunderstandings, misreadings, and misrepresentations. Elizabeth has her work set out for her if she is to acquire the sort of education that matters, at least in this novel and to this novelist.

Jane Bennet, too, experiences both story lines—a stranger, a trip. And so does

Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte, in a speech Elizabeth cannot believe to be serious, suggests that “In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew *more* affection than she feels.” Charlotte takes her own advice, and Jane, not born to duplicity or even simple flattery, will not. This creates both dramatic tension and comic relief. Why did Bingley go to London; why, when Jane goes to London, does he not come to see her? How does a man who has just professed “the violence of my affections” (as if!) to one woman, happily settle for another within three days?

Both the book and the heroine are exuberant. Jane Austen herself was proud of the book and the heroine, and proud of what she had accomplished after she “lop’t and crop’t so successfully.” In early February 1813, she wrote to her sister Cassandra with some playful thoughts: “I am quite vain enough & well satisfied enough,—The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling;—it wants shade;—it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had, if not of solemn specious nonsense—about something



Hero's recruiting at Kelsey's; or, Guard-Day at St. James's,
James Gillray, 1797.
Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. 797.6.9.2.



The Charms of a Red Coat, 1787.

Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. 787.11.1.1.

unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte—or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile.—I doubt your quite agreeing with me here—I know your starched Notions.” Austen is not serious here: she knew nothing was missing; she is the one who lop’t it and crop’t it.

With the introduction of the —shire militia, the entire village of Meryton is turned upside down—an entire regiment of strangers coming to town! They don’t know how to read character, or they

are perhaps too hasty in doing so: They like Darcy; they dislike Darcy; they like Darcy. Of another it is reported, “All Meryton seemed striving to blacken the man, who, but three months before, had been almost an angel of light. . . . Every body declared that he was the wickedest young man in the world; and every body began to find out, that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness.” Information in this town spreads quickly: “Mrs. Bennet was privileged to whisper it to Mrs. Philips, and *she* ventured, without any permission, to do the same by all her neighbours in Meryton.” Gossip, after all, formed the current events of the day!

The youngest daughter, Lydia, is also given both story lines—a stranger (or several) arrive in town; she goes on a journey . . . and then another with one of those strangers.

Think of it: Austen has tackled both of John Gardner's basic story lines in fiction, not once, not twice, not thrice, but four times in one novel. Perhaps it was this ability to balance so many story lines into one secure plot that prompted one critic to declare: The "plot is a superb piece of machinery, and as with a Rolls-Royce, part of the proper pleasure that we take in the book lies in our appreciation of the quality of the engineering and the smoothness of the ride."

As a novel *Pride and Prejudice* matches the wit and sparkle of Elizabeth Bennet. It is *her* book. There has never been a heroine like Elizabeth, "as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print." (Those are Jane Austen's words when she received her first printed copy of the book in 1813.) Consider Lizzy, not just a "walker," as Miss Bingley disparages, she energetically jumps over stiles and springs over puddles. She is energetic in all she does: She argues, laughs, reasons, resists. She is witty and courageous; she holds her ground, but, importantly, she can also change her mind. She takes lemons and makes lemonade. But of her it would not be said what Bingley felt about Jane: "he could not conceive an angel more beautiful." True, there are times when she speaks her mind and we rejoice; but there are also times that she should hold her tongue, and she doesn't. We cringe when Elizabeth, breaching propriety yet again, shares her opinions about Mr. Darcy with another stranger, Wickham.

Some say *Pride and Prejudice* is a didactic novel; that it is trying to teach a lesson and is therefore conservative in its impulse. Perhaps they are reinserting what Austen "lop't and crop't" out of it, for the two people who are the most didactic—Mary Bennet and Mr. Collins—are both shown to be fools. At a moment of extreme anguish for her family, Mary spouts platitudes. Mr. Collins's proposal sounds more like a business arrangement, and to his mind it very well might have been.

*Men, Marriage Proposals,
and Misreading*

Although Mr. Collins manages to gets his proposal out before he is "run away by his feelings" (as if!), Lizzy certainly wants to run away after hearing him. Unlike "Slick Wick," Mr. Collins unflinchingly puts his foot in his mouth. As Lizzy tells Jane, he is "a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man." She might very well have added that he repeats himself, uses a limited number of clichés ("the offered olive branch"), and is a sycophant and hypocrite. There he goes, a clergy advocating morals who dances *and* plays cards. Perhaps his sense of morality is rather untrustworthy. When he becomes the spokesperson for Fordyce and all those others who would limit women's lives, we understand this, too, is not to be trusted.

Yes, we hear about Mr. Darcy, but only in general, and except in the first part of the novel, we are not given access to his *thoughts*. We know he believes it will be difficult for the Bennet girls to marry well. We know he believes there are not six women he would consider accomplished. We know these things

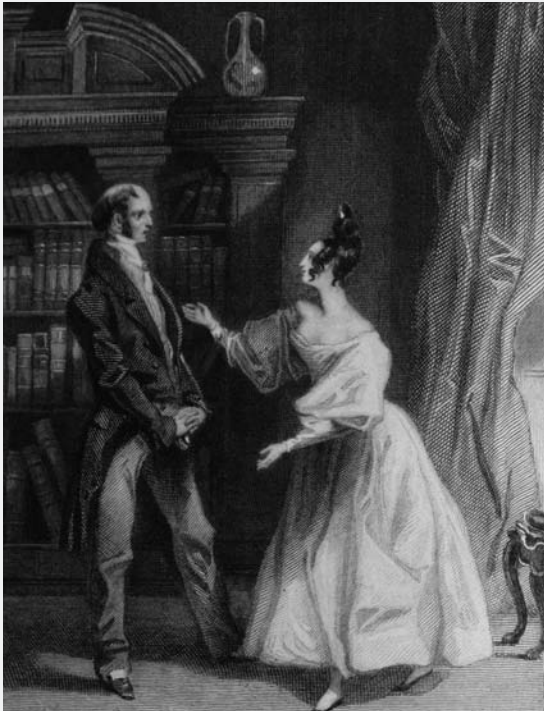
only because he voices them. As with Elizabeth, it may be hard to get Darcy's measure, we hear so much conflicting information on him!

When Darcy is overheard saying "You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room," this is heard as petulant ill humor. Does it represent his character or is he just having a bad night? Is Darcy miffed that Bingley has the nicest looking girl despite Darcy's higher social status? Often Darcy's behavior can be interpreted generously or meanly. Lizzy's mistake (her prejudice) is to interpret it meanly; for instance, that he is rude rather than shy, or that he is proud rather than in a bad mood. For instance, why does Darcy tolerate Bingley's sisters? Lizzy might have seen Darcy's patience and forbearance there.

Lizzy is a bad detective. Col. Fitzwilliam tells her Darcy keeps postponing his departure from his aunt's at Rosings. Why does Darcy do this? Though she tells Darcy what part of Rosings is her favorite walk so he will avoid it, instead he continues to run into her there. Indeed, Lizzy has much to learn.

Fathers and Disappointments

In many of Austen's novels, fathers are a disappointment. A pleasant evening with General Tilney? Impossible. Before our eyes, Mr. Woodhouse would have our asparagus and sweetbread whisked from the table for failing to meet his arbitrary standards; and the fire would be so warm we'd be drenched in sweat. Sir Walter



The frontispiece to the 1833 edition of Pride and Prejudice, published by Richard Bentley. "She then told him what Mr. Darcy had voluntarily done for Lydia. He heard her with astonishment." Courtesy of the Burke Jane Austen Collection, Goucher College Library.

Elliot? Most of us would rather chose to walk three miles and muddy a petticoat—or two—rather than sit with him and Lady Dalrymple. But Mr. Bennet? Mr. Bennet, “so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice,” would be entertaining. How long, though, would it last? Especially if we are as interested in human nature as Lizzy? Would we not see the human cost to Mrs. Bennet of his humor that deprecates and misdirects? He aggravates his wife’s nerves rather than relieving them. He can never come right out and say anything directly, “I will go see this stranger at Netherfield.” “I have gone to see this stranger at Netherfield; he is very nice. His name is Bingley.” He sports with her. Countering her worries about what will happen to her and her children if he dies, he admits to a different fantasy, “Let us hope for better things. . . . that I might be the survivor.” Ouch. It is not for nothing that Martin Amis calls Mr. Bennet the “most cynical character in all Jane Austen.”

We like him at first; we are laughing with him in the first chapter and those that follow, but soon we realize his is a dangerous cynicism, at least if one wishes to be an effective parent. The cynic speaks from an emotionally remote distance. Lizzy points out the effects of this on Lydia: “She has never been taught to think on serious subjects. . . . She has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity. She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner.” (Sounds like the feminist critiques from that time!)



Lady Catherine confronts Elizabeth in the first illustrated edition of Pride and Prejudice published by Richard Bentley in 1833.

Courtesy of the Burke Jane Austen Collection, Goucher College Library.

Three Refusals

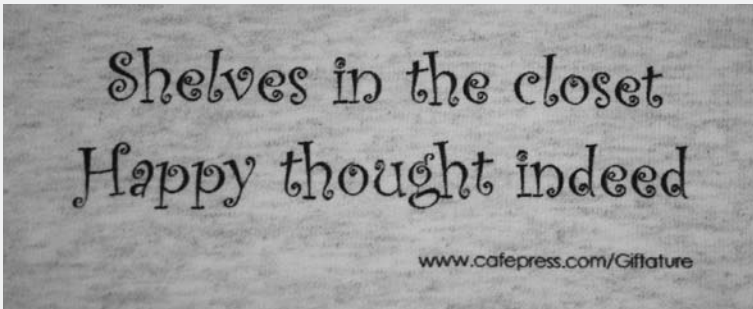
Elizabeth *does* learn from her father. She has learned how to stand up for herself.

Lizzy (so very articulate in refusing) actually gets the opportunity to refuse three times (Collins, Darcy, Lady Catherine). These refusals indicate, as political analyses of the novel suggest,

that *Pride and Prejudice* refuses to toe the line in terms of the conduct expectations for young women. Elizabeth will not marry without love; she will not respect the hierarchy of rank and class. For her misguided “journey,” Lydia is not cast out of the house. Lydia, who is also “exuberant,” in her “wild giddiness” makes Elizabeth’s impertinence acceptable. But Lydia undergoes no education; she refuses the benefits of self-evaluation. Even when her aunt Gardiner speaks to her about serious matters, Lydia ignores her. Lydia laughs and feels no regrets; Elizabeth, self-reflecting, cannot always laugh and *will* feel regret.

Jane Austen magnificently juggles all of these story lines: the strangers com-

ing to town, leaving town (sometimes precipitously, sometimes overstaying their welcome) alternately provoking confusion and happier feelings; the heroines going on journeys, to London, to Hunsford, to Devonshire, to Brighton. Almost a century ago, Reginald Farrer declared that *Pride and Prejudice* is “the greatest miracle of English literature.” Austen created a novel not unlike Pemberly itself, Darcy’s well-kept but unostentatious Derbyshire estate: “neither gaudy nor uselessly fine.” Would Elizabeth ask us if we fall in love with the novel for its impertinence or for its liveliness of mind? We’ll have to go back and reread it another time to see. Happy thought, indeed!



THE Sentence.



*It is a truth universally acknowledged
that Jane Austen kicks ass.*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the beginning line of a good novel will be endlessly copied. One of the best imitations out there—“it is a truth universally known that Everything is Funnier with Monkeys”—is the opening line of a book review by Paul Collins in the January 14-20, 2004, edition of the *Village Voice*. Mr. Collins reviews a reprinted Victorian sexual education manual starring a suit-wearing primate—something the Austenian Mr. Collins would have blushed quite deeply at, in fear of it offending his patroness.

A quick search on Google reveals that possibly no other sentence in English literature has suffered the flattery of imitation as often as the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*. The *New York Times* alone has recycled the line in countless ways, causing its brightness to fade under the unoriginality of its successors.

From that first sentence we know that Jane Austen is challenging us to read beyond the words. After all, it is not a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife, except perhaps for mothers in possession of an excess of marriageable young girls. It is the best scene setter in the world, telling us: don't expect the whole truth, and I'm not starting with one.

In one sentence, Austen sweeps away generalized statements taken for fact. Her readers would recognize the style from many eighteenth-century moralists who offered sweeping statements.

Did Austen take the idea from one of her favorite writers? In Samuel Johnson's *Rambler*, Hymenaeus, a young bachelor, complains about the “vultures” who employed eloquence and artifices to promote their schemes of attracting him

to their daughters, saying “I was known to possess a fortune, and to want a wife.” Literary critic Ellen Moers points out that “All of Jane Austen’s opening paragraphs, and the best of her first sentences, have money in them.” The opening sentence to *Emma* reads: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition. . . .” And *Mansfield Park*, “About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntington, with only seven thousand pounds. . . .”

But the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is importantly paired with a second sentence, often dropped from consideration when under discussion.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feeling or views of such a man may be on his first entering into a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surroundings families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

Upon the rhythm of these first two sentences, Richard Jenkyns sees the influence of the weekly public reading of the Psalms in church. With a father who was rector of Steventon, Austen would have been a regular churchgoer. Jenkyns proposes,

She will have heard readings from the Psalms in church almost every week of her life: their rhythms, with verse answering to verse, or half-verse to half-verse, echoing, amplifying, or

explaining, were bound to sink deep into her consciousness:

The heavens declare the glory of
God; and the firmament sheweth
his handiwork.
One day telleth another: and one
night certifieth another.

Such are the rhythms that open *Pride and Prejudice*.

The rhythms are lost when the novel is made into a movie. Then the ironic tone of the narrator must be picked up by one of the characters. In the 1980 BBC miniseries, Elizabeth speaks the line to Charlotte Lucas. In the 1995 BBC version, Elizabeth speaks it to her sisters after church, upon hearing her mother tell her father of Bingley’s moving to Netherfield. And in the 1940 and 2005 versions, it goes missing in action. Bridget Jones, contemporary manifestation of Elizabeth Bennet, proclaims, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that when one part of your life starts going okay, another falls spectacularly to pieces.” In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, we find it rewritten as “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife.”

Austen wants us to rewrite that sentence. Emily Auerbach in *Searching for Jane Austen* suggests: “If we deduce that single women want husbands with fortunes, we simultaneously must conclude that ironic authors want readers with perception. From the start, Austen asks us to approach her novel in the spirit of intelligent and subversive questioning.”