

nevertheless "metaphorically depicted it" in the sexual dialectic and interpenetration of their dialogues. But when she goes on to say that they have also been damaged, humbled and "ruthlessly chopped" by one another, she surely overstates the case: one of the delights of this novel is that its hero and heroine are allowed to learn without too much suffering or humiliation, and far from having to cut themselves down to size to enter the Procrustean bed of marriage, they are given one another *and* the riches of Pemberley. A fairy-tale ending, but one justified by the sexual rance that shines from the protagonists. If anyone ever has a chance to make a good marriage, these two have.

And in her other relationships, Elizabeth also shines. Her fondness for her sister Jane, her spirited rejoinders to Miss Bingley, her instant (and correct) appraisal of Mr. Collins, her loyal friendship to Charlotte Lucas—all show her in an amiable light. Unlike Elinor Dashwood, she is not too wise—she is taken in very easily by Mr. Wickham—but she has a quick resilience and an easiness of temper that make her able to cut her losses very quickly. She is half-disposed to find herself half in love with the apparently eligible thirty-year-old Colonel Fitzwilliam, but when he warns her that as a younger son he cannot afford to marry, she quickly swallows what must have been a moment of real mortification for a dowryless girl and with some courage teases him about "the usual price of an Earl's younger son." After this, her main instinct is to put him at his ease for having made her uncomfortable. She shows a similar generosity in more serious circumstances when she says "with a good-humored smile" to Wickham (who is foolishly insisting on his own version of Darcy's conduct), "Come, Mr. Wickham, we are brother and sister, you know. Do not let us quarrel about the past. In future, I hope we shall always be of one mind." And she holds out her hand to him, which he kisses "with affectionate gallantry" and much embarrassment. We know that Jane Austen herself felt a peculiar fondness for her heroine (whom she claimed with only a touch of self-mockery to consider "as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print"), and can only be grateful that, exceptionally, she allowed her a free rein as well as a bright future.

If the brightness and sparkle of the central characters account for the book's appeal on its first impression, perhaps we do not need to look further. But it has other satisfactions, and other shades. The neatness of the plot and its expert articulation have been justly admired: there are ~~none of the~~ uneasy shifts of focus or hasty tying or cutting of Gordian knots that mark and mar the other two early novels. Nothing here is superfluous or implausible; the story unfolds with a pleasing mixture of suspense and

foreknowledge, and it fulfills all its own expectations. The shocks and surprises all make sense: when Lydia runs off with Wickham, we are surprised only that we had not seen it coming, and Darcy's explanations of his past conduct are far more convincing than the more lurid revelations of Colonel Brandon's in *Sense and Sensibility*. Almost all the characters are given space and identity, and even those who appear very sketchily, such as the indolent Mr. Hurst or the pleasant Colonel Fitzwilliam, are integrated into and play an important role in both plot and social atmosphere. Compare the treatment of Kitty Bennet with that of Margaret Dashwood, the youngest sister in *Sense and Sensibility*: Margaret as an individual hardly exists and has little real function in the novel, whereas Kitty, although the most shadowy of the five Bennet girls, has more than a merely supernumerary role (though that, of course, is important, as numbers are of the essence here). She echoes Lydia, she imitates Lydia, she is fretful because she cannot follow Lydia: her very lack of character is her character, and she adds considerably to the interplay of family dynamics. Austen understood sibling rivalry very well, and here, in this small portrait, offers another dimension of it.

The novel has also been highly praised for its accurate portrayal of social customs, but it is here that we come to one of its more controversial aspects. Some readers really deeply dislike the society in which Austen's works are so firmly grounded: much ado about nothing indeed is the accusation, and what about the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars? Have soldiers nothing better to do than to flirt with young women, play whist and lottery, and seduce the daughters of tradesmen? Come to that, has *nobody anything better to do?* And on inspection, it does appear that many of the novel's characters do remarkably little. Bingley shoots and gives parties and admits to not reading very much; Mr. Hurst plays cards and falls asleep; even Mr. Collins, who has a proper job, seems to spend most of his time watching the road for carriages or eating at Rosings. Wickham's military duties do not seem to be very onerous. Darcy, it is true, is shown as a responsible landowner admired by his housekeeper, tenants and servants, but he too has a great deal of leisure. Mr. Gardiner is in trade in the city, but we see and hear next to nothing of him at work. The women, of course, are not expected to employ themselves except at the piano: Mrs. Bennet is proud of the fact that her daughters (unlike Charlotte Lucas) do not have to busy themselves in the kitchen, as she has a first-rate cook. Various maids feature, almost subliminally, in the text—Jane and Elizabeth are "helped on" with their gowns and have their hair dressed by a nonspeaking part called Sarah.

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all this - greater picture

Society - People do very little - most women