Responding to Criticism

From “*Pride and Prejudice* and the Pursuit of Happiness” by Claudia L. Johnson

Austen’s simultaneously bold and delicate handling of the confrontation between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine typifies her entire relationship to the novelistic tradition of social criticism under discussion here. The treatment is decisively progressive because Elizabeth does not consider the interests of the ruling class to be morally binding upon her: “Neither duty, not honour, nor gratitude,” Elizabeth holds, “have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either, would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy.” Defending her love of laughter from charges of cynicism, Elizabeth proclaims, “I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good,” and this promise of principled restraint differentiates Elizabeth’s laughter from Lydia’s animal glee. But at a time when Hannah More, among others, was writing conduct books for the middle classes and tracts for the lower, enjoining both not to question the wisdom of Providence in placing them in humbler spheres, Elizabeth’s disclaimer is not quite so innocuous as it may appear, for the point of contention is exactly what or who is “wise or good,” and Elizabeth appears not to doubt her own qualifications to decide for herself, and has no trouble censuring a Lady’s officious airs or ridiculing a pompous patrician with his failure to behave like a gentleman. As far as Elizabeth is concerned, “extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue” will always command her respect, but the “mere stateliness of money and rank” will not awe her. Convinced that they occupied high ground, progressive novelists seize on the same kinds of distinctions and exploit them for all they are worth, contending, more systematically and more conspicuously of course, that the defenders of money and rank marshal speciously ethical artillery – such as Lady Catherine’s “duty,” “honour,” and “gratitude” – in order to sustain their hegemony, and that it is only by force of “prejudice” that we are either bullied or duped into equating our moral imperatives with their interests.

Although this much is clearly true, the conflict between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine nevertheless remains exceedingly discreet in that even as it demarcates this politically volatile issue, it circumnavigates it at the same time. Austen dramatizes social prejudice, and her revised title highlights that buzzword. But people lower on the social scale can be prejudiced too, and the disputants themselves stand well back from polemical jargon. *Pride and Prejudice* thus alternatively verges on and recoils from radical criticism: Lady Catherine is not quite so extreme as to claim outright that the well-being of the kingdom depends on the purity of her family line. And for her part, Elizabeth claims not that she has the right to quit the “sphere” of her birth, but rather that in marrying Darcy, she would be staying within that sphere: “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal.” To the extent that this assertion of equality demystifies the great gentry, it serves reformist ends, for it deprives men like Darcy of any rationale for their pride. But in the meantime, it leaves the social structure radicals had assailed substantially intact. Elizabeth, after all, changes her mind about Darcy when she realizes how conscientiously he tends to the happiness of those in his charge as a good master, landlord, and brother: “How much of people’s happiness were in his guardianship! – How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow.”