

The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet

and

Mr. Darcy

In her essay “The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet” Susan Fraiman argues that Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of Jane Austen’s 1813 novel Pride and Prejudice, is disempowered when she marries Fitzwilliam Darcy who “succeeds Mr. Bennet as controlling literary figure” (Fraiman 383). Elizabeth, Fraiman claims, is a surrogate-son to her father trapped inside her female body during an age when gender roles were rigorously fixed. In her essay of 1990 called “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler states that “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect” (Butler 279). Through the contribution of Butler’s theory, this essay aims to demonstrate that it is not only, as Fraiman claims, Elizabeth Bennet who is punished by society for performing her gender wrong, but also Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth is disempowered after her marriage due to the limited rights of wives in Regency England, but Mr. Darcy is equally disempowered before his marriage, which almost doesn’t take place because of his inability to align himself with society’s gender expectations. Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy do not unite until they succumb to their society’s gender-convention.

To perform one’s gender ‘right,’ as Judith Butler asserts in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” means to perform one’s gender in accordance with historical and cultural sanctions that change over time. Butler’s essay deconstructs society’s belief that gender is a fixed natural given. She questions if and how we exist before societal ideology’s imposition by

observing gender in a phenomenological way and finds that gender is always performed, but the performance varies according to time period. What does not vary, however, is society's punishment of people who don't perform their gender according to the current convention.

Elizabeth Bennet has aligned herself with her father and his male, independent perspective. Mr. Bennet "bequeaths [to Elizabeth] his ironic distance from the world, the habit of studying and appraising those around him, the role of social critic (Fraiman 379). Therefore Lizzie is "less a daughter than a surrogate son," who "by giving up the mother and giving in to the father, reaps the spoils of maleness" (Fraiman 379). In regards to society, however, Lizzie's male independence is dangerous. She does not behave like a gentlewoman of her time who was expected to draw and do needlework indoors while waiting for a suitor to whisk her off to the altar. Lizzie disdains decorum and enjoys the outdoors: "No, indeed. I do not wish to avoid the walk. The distance is nothing, when one has a motive" (Austen 22). The haughty Bingley sisters immediately declare her behavior unsuitable: "To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum" (Austen 25). When Mr. Collins proposes to Lizzie, she doesn't employ "the usual practice of elegant females," but declines his offer as a "rational creature speaking the truth from her heart" (Austen 75). While Lizzie's decision to refuse the buffoonish Mr. Collins is justified, it is nonetheless precarious in her situation. If she and her sister Jane hadn't married Darcy and Bingley respectively, which can be regarded as the exceptions to the rule, they would have lost their parents' entailed house to Mr. Collins. Lizzie, within Regency England society, is performing her gender 'wrong' by not accepting a promising proposal. Instead, she displays typically male behavior: "You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear

me? But I will not be alarmed though your sister *does* play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me” (Austen 115). Obstinance and audacity are not socially scripted feminine qualities. Lizzie turns down Mr. Darcy’s proposal in an equally confident manner: “Every time Darcy opens his mouth, he is superseded by a speech of greater length and vehemence;” “Her language, her feelings, her judgments overwhelm his” (Fraiman 361). Elizabeth here not only matches Darcy in intellect, she tops him. Many of her characteristics would be highly-regarded in a man, but not in a woman.

In respect to convention, Mister Darcy performs his gender ‘wrong’ as well. He goes by a feminine name and is often passive, “unsocial” and “taciturn” as Elizabeth puts it (Austen 63). He admits: “I certainly have not the talent which some people possess of conversing easily with those I have never seen before” (Austen 116). In a woman, such behavior would be welcomed as reservation, but in a man it is interpreted as pride. Darcy’s shyness is revealed at the Netherfield ball “when [Elizabeth] found herself suddenly addressed by Mr. Darcy, who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that, without knowing what she did, she accepted him. He walked away again immediately” (Austen 62). Darcy’s walking away is a sign that he is not at ease in the part of the aggressor, which is what society expects of a man. It never occurs to anyone that Mr. Darcy might be glossing over his shyness with pride. He admits to Elizabeth at the very end of Pride and Prejudice that he was embarrassed when she asks him why he was “so shy of [her]” (Austen 256). It must be considered then that Darcy does not want to ‘humiliate’ Elizabeth with his “extensive power” of a “paternalistic noble” but is rather humiliated by it himself (Fraiman 384). He has, after all, many ‘feminine’ characteristics: He waits to be

approached; he prefers listening to talking; he is receptive rather than aggressive; he is anxious about his reputation and judges people according to their manners; he is the person his friends come to for advice, and he writes letters instead of personally confronting people. Mr. Darcy, were he the conventional male, would have stood his ground after his botched proposal to Elizabeth and directly explained to her in person why he counseled his friend Bingley against marrying Elizabeth's sister Jane, and what kind of a person Mr. Wickham really is. Darcy doesn't do that, however. Instead of being aggressive, he goes home to reflect on the event, and then he decides on the rather indirect route of writing a letter to Elizabeth to explain his motives.

While letter-communication was common practice in Regency England for both women and men alike, the letter Mr. Darcy writes to Elizabeth is not a regular correspondence letter, but a letter that deals with his strong emotions in a very feminine fashion. In his need to justify himself for Elizabeth's accusations, he bares his soul in such a forthcoming, dignified, and eloquent manner as only a woman's love letter would be expected to accomplish. His letter is so well-composed that he likely dedicated hours of drafts to it. Austen emphasizes the uniqueness of Darcy's letter by putting male letter-writing into perspective. Charles Bingley's letters are described as chaotic, correspondence-related and short: "Charles writes in the most careless way imaginable. He leaves out half his words, and blots the rest," claims his sister Caroline (Austen 33). Meanwhile, she employs feminine terms to depict Mr. Darcy's writing: "do you always write such charming long letters" (Austen 32-3). The boyish Elizabeth, in contrast, writes two letters in Pride and Prejudice: both are addressed to Mrs. Gardiner and are simple correspondence letters. Mr. Darcy's letter therefore is less of a hostile takeover of authorial power, as Fraiman calls it ("her authorial powers wane"), but rather his only means of expressing

himself to Elizabeth (Fraiman 377). He is not a “controlling literary figure” (Fraiman 383) that replaces Elizabeth’s father, but someone who takes a great risk by revealing sensitive personal details which could be used to destroy him socially to a woman who has just refused him as a husband. In a very feminine way, Mr. Darcy gives Elizabeth power over his family’s reputation and himself. Darcy’s behavior so far has, as Butler puts it, “initiate[d] a set of punishments both obvious and indirect” (Butler 279). Elizabeth especially, as a member of her society, misreads him repeatedly and therefore indirectly disempowers him because he cannot make himself heard by her. Mr. Darcy’s passive feminine side is generally misread by society as pride, which shows that to perform one’s gender ‘wrong’ results in punishment. Darcy doesn’t court Elizabeth in the way she and society expect; therefore he, just as much as Lizzie, suffers “a loss of clout” (Fraiman 377). The gender-performance that is expected of Elizabeth and Darcy by society runs anathema to their original one and they realize toward the end of the novel that they have to succumb to society’s gender-script if they want to be together. As Susan Fraiman argues, Elizabeth, as a woman, has to relinquish some of her power: “Elizabeth marries a decent man and a large estate, but at a certain cost;” “Darcy disempowers Elizabeth if only because of the positions they each occupy in the social schema: because he is a man and she is a wife” (Fraiman 384). The cost is her compromise, but Darcy has to make it as well; the cost might even be a gain if Darcy respects Elizabeth as a wife, and there is no evidence in the novel that he won’t.

Fraiman’s blame of Mr. Darcy disempowering Elizabeth is misdirected in that she reads him solely as a man, not as a *person* who has as much trouble performing his gender right as does Lizzie. Darcy has to give up passive observing and letter-writing in favor of action, such as saving the damsel in distress Lydia. Fraiman’s critique of Elizabeth marrying Darcy also does

not invoke singleness as a liberating alternative, in which case Lizzie would lose even more power. The novel rather reveals the limits of *everyone's* personal autonomy in a society where gender roles are fixed. Mr. Darcy never sought to take Elizabeth's power or independence away- quite the opposite- they caused his falling in love with her. If Elizabeth is disempowered after her marriage, the blame must be directed at Regency society, not Mr. Darcy; marriage itself is always a compromise, after all. Mr. Darcy, just as much as Elizabeth, sacrifices a great deal of his original individuality by aligning his gender-performance with Regency society's convention. But, as Lizzie says: "We do not suffer by *accident*" (Austen 94).