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Doing Justice in *Pride and Prejudice*[1]

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Introduction

As Vivian Jones in her introduction to the Penguin edition of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) put it, one of the enduring appeal of the novel derives from the firm and, when necessary, pliant views and attitude of the intelligent and articulate heroine. She is 'a studier of character' who observes others and forms a judgement and the hero's discernment appreciates her views.[2]

This paper examines the importance of 'justice', above all, 'doing justice' to oneself and others in Jane Austen's world. Toward the middle of the story, at the outset of all-important Darcy's letter, what he relies on is Elizabeth's justice, her doing justice to him: 'You must, therefore, pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice.'[3] What he mentions here is Elizabeth's justice and he invites Elizabeth's attention, and eventually the readers', to what he says and also to the 'justice' he expects Elizabeth will do to him.

Recent critical works on Austen pay prominent attention to judgement. Among others, Vivasvan Soni argues that evasion of judgement is one of the distinctive characteristics of modernity. Everyday practice and critical thinking is inevitably accompanied with judgement though responsibility for it tends to be

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[1] This paper is an expansion of the paper read at Pride and Prejudice conference at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge in June 2013. The research for the paper has been supported by JSPS research fund (22520236).

[2] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Penguin, 1996), xi-xxxv.

[3] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 218.

evaded and proper procedure to reach a judgement tends to be hidden.[4] Soni maintains that *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the works that are both a product of the crisis of judgment and a response to the crisis.[5] In his analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth's making judgement is closely followed. This is because in this work characters are delineated as a result:

> Character is not some already existing thing about which Elizabeth makes a judgment; rather, the new conception of character is itself the product of the judgment she makes, revealing the constructive and creative power of judgment.[6]

Her writing style draws attention of the readers to the procedure of making judgement: 'To judge, Austen teaches us, is to act on the basis of our freedom and to make that freedom *real* in the world.'[7] In this instruction the vacuity the versatile and skillful narrator makes allows the reader to make their own judgment.[8] Emsley in her book on moral judgement in Austen's writings maintains that Austen deals with transcendental values, making heroines ask themselves how they should live their lives; how they should realize virtues in life.[9]

Thus invitation to making judgement is offered adeptly. Furthermore, judgement is leading to doing justice. For information, in *Pride and Prejudice*, there are 19 'justices' (including injustices), out of which there are nine sets of 'doing somebody justice'. For those whose mother tongue is English, this 'doing justice' thing might be a matter of course and there is nothing special, but to those who do not speak English every day, or at least to me, this phrase is full of wonder and more

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[4] Vivasvan Soni, "Introduction: The Crisis of Judgment," *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation* 51, no. 3 (2010): 261-288.

[5] Ibid.: 261-288; Vivasvan Soni, "Committing Freedom: The Cultivation of Judgment in Roussearu's *Emile* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*," *The Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation* 51, no. 3 (2010): 363-387.

[6] Soni, "Committing Freedom: The Cultivation of Judgment in Roussearu's *Emile* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.", 378.

[7] Ibid., 381.

[8] Caroline Austin-Bolt, "Mediating Happiness: Performances of Jane Austen's Narrators," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 42 (2013): 271-89.

[9] Sarah Baxter Emsley, *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues* (New York ; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

importantly, it represents, I suggest, the key to understand *Pride and Prejudice.*

When A does justice to B, the concept of 'due', 'just', 'right', 'fitting', 'deserving', merits and appreciation is referred to and there is always some kind of judgement by an evaluator. So, it is worth focusing on the descriptions that draw attention to the importance of being a good observer who can duly do justice. 'Doing' justice can either involve 'action' or do without action just in the course of thinking. Usually 'justice' should be universal, but the justice in doing justice is quite personal or personalized and adjusted to an individual's abilities and situations. Doing justice works both over time and at one time. When over time it involves modification to the past behavior or thought. When at one time it refers to the different levels of a person's self. This versatile nature of 'doing justice' enriches *Pride and Prejudice,* after all satisfying the readers.

Jane Austen's Letters to Cassandra and J.S. Clarke

The phrase is above all very useful in everyday mode of expression when there is something to amend. For example, in her letter to Cassandra in 1813, Jane Austen admits she has to modify her assessment:

> As I wrote of my nephews with a little bitterness in my last, I think it particularly incumbent on me to do them justice now, … After having much praised or much blamed anybody, one is generally sensible of something just the reverse soon afterwards.[10]

She thinks she was too pungent in her remarks on her nephews in the previous letter – though the letter in question is lost and we are unable to see how bitter and unkind her comments were – and 'After having much praised or much blamed anybody, one is generally sensible of something just the reverse' so she praises them, thus doing them justice.

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[10] Deirdre Le Faye, ed. *Jane Austen's Letters,* 3rd ed / collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye. ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 232. There is a note to this letter: This letter, presumably written during the week beginning Sunday, 3 Oct 1813, was no doubt destroyed by CEA for this reason.' 'CEA' refers to Cassandra-Elizabeth Austen, Jane's sister.

When Austen wishes for the success of *Emma* in a letter to James Stanier Clarke, historiographer to the king, she first mentions hope and expectation, followed by an acknowledgment of its inferiority in the appeal to the readers who appreciated wit in *Pride and Prejudice* and good sense in *Mansfield Park*:

> My greatest anxiety at present is that this 4th work shd not disgrace what was good in the others. but on this point I will do myself the justice to declare that whatever may be my wishes for its' success, I am very strongly haunted by the idea that to those Readers who have preferred P&P. it will appear inferior in Wit, & to those who have preferred MP. very inferior in good Sense.[11]

Here she can frankly utter hopefulness because she knows she can show a sentence later that she is not a person swept away by unqualified optimism. Simple hope can be qualified and modified by a proleptic addition of 'doing herself the justice to declare' a more careful reflection. Reconsideration and restriction regain the rein of thought, but before that, one's remark can be naïve, simple, frank, or imprudent. In other words, the set of mind which has the possible procedure of doing justice ready at hand can be liberated and unscrupulous as things can be modified later.

Edward and Elizabeth doing justice

One impressive person in Jane Austen's world whose description begins with the problem of the gap between the inner self and the appearance is Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*. The Dashwood mother and sisters discern his good sense and character while, it later turns out, his own mother, sister and brother cannot because they have different views of life and their family ambition does not go well with Edward's intentions. The Dashwoods can see his goodness through his awkwardness:

> Edward Ferrars was not recommended to their good opinion by any peculiar

[11] Dated Monday 11 December 1815, ibid., p. 306.

graces of person or address. He was not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing. He was too diffident to do justice to himself; but when his natural shyness was overcome, his behaviour gave every indication of an open, affectionate heart. His understanding was good, and his education had given it solid improvement.[12]

We are persuaded that he is a worthy person in the heart and mind, but his shyness builds so high a wall that he is awkward and far from behaving himself pleasantly. The sentence 'his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing' could be applied to Mr Darcy, but the description that 'He was too diffident to do justice to himself' means a little more. This sentence is constructed with minute attention. It is different from, say, 'he did not do justice to himself'. Elinor's discernment draws the reader on his side, but in retrospect, the reader realizes his diffidence was not without reason. He does not do justice to his own virtues but behaving diffidently, he is doing justice to himself who has been secretly engaged with Lucy.

Assessment of characters is not simple. It is not only the matter of a person's behaviour and their inner virtues. The endearing moment of Elizabeth's self-discovery comes through her reflection concerning Wickham and her false assessment. It is on reconsidering what she thinks of Wickham that she realizes 'Till this moment, I never knew myself.'[13] The encounter with Wickham betrays Elizabeth's susceptibility to a good-looking man, while he also invites clear sight and understanding through his concealment and distortion. He inadvertently helps Elizabeth to exert her analytical ability in the self-review on her own. He is, in another occasion, this time in conversation, the agent to illuminate the need to pay close attention to the role of an observer. Wickham invites a comparison between Darcy and his amiable cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, intending to arouse disgust toward Darcy, but his design backfires:

"His manners are very different from his cousin's."

"Yes, very different. But I think Mr. Darcy improves on acquaintance."

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[12] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Edward Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 18.

[13] Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*: , p. 230.

"Indeed!" cried Wickham with a look which did not escape her. "And pray may I ask?" but checking himself, he added in a gayer tone, "Is it in address that he improves? Has he deigned to add ought of civility to his ordinary style? for I dare not hope," he continued in a lower and more serious tone, "that he is improved in essentials."

"Oh, no!" said Elizabeth. "In essentials, I believe, he is very much what he ever was."

While she spoke, Wickham looked as if scarcely knowing whether to rejoice over her words, or to distrust their meaning. There was a something in her countenance which made him listen with an apprehensive and anxious attention, while she added,

"When I said that he improved on acquaintance, I did not mean that either his mind or manners were in a state of improvement, but that from knowing him better, his disposition was better understood."[14]

In this crucial conversation between Wickham and Elizabeth, a little after Elizabeth read Darcy's letter, values concerning personality depend on something more than the authentic self and the appearance. Wickham wants to leave Darcy as a person of maliciousness and unjustified resentment and is ready to discuss his improvement, if any, on the basis of appearance only.

However, Elizabeth refers to his improvement neither in essentials nor in appearance. This is beyond Wickham's usual perspectives. Her point is that somebody's personality improves according to the observer's ability to understand the person better.

As for improvement, it not only refers to intrinsic changes for the better, but to the relationship between the observer and the observed. The observed does not necessarily have to improve themselves but the changes in the perception of the observer can be referred to as an improvement.

Wickham fears if Darcy has done justice to himself, conquering the unsociable tendency. Elizabeth does not address the problem from this point of view, but she suggests he has improved when the observer does him justice. On the

[14] Ibid., pp. 259-60.

contrary, during this conversation, Wickham's duplicity is highly visible to the clear-sighted observer and us readers; he 'looked surprised, displeased, alarmed' and he is suspiciously cautious about what he says, 'checking himself', being 'apprehensive and anxious', his 'alarm in a heightened complexion and agitated look', his forced 'gayer tone', his remarks 'in the gentlest accents', all speak out his falsehood. It does not escape Elizabeth's observation.

Involving the perspective of the observer in knowing the object's values rather than presenting it on the axis of appearance and inner quality, or amiability and virtue, Austen liberates an individual from the trap of solitariness and a character from the narrator's omnipotent fixed evaluation. It places a character in the relationship with an observer, and the character's value in the social and mutual understanding. It also ultimately offers the characters and the story to the view and judgement of the observer or the reader.

Elizabeth

This frame of invitation to eliciting judgement is obvious from the beginning of this novel. Let's see how the heroines of her novels are introduced to the reader. Austen's heroines, Elinor, Marianne, Emma, Fanny, Catherine and Anne, are all first introduced by the narrator in this way:

> Elinor, this eldest daughter whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement, … her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong…[15]
>
> Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation.[16]
>
> Fanny Price was at this time just ten years old, and tough there might not be much in her first appearance to captivate, there was, at least, nothing to disgust her relations.[17]

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[15] Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*: p. 7.

[16] Ibid., p. 7.

[17] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005),

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.[18]

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Catherine, [was] for many years of her life, as plain as any.[19]

… but Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, was nobody with either father or sister; her word had no weight, her convenience was always to give way – she was only Anne. …

A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own), there could be nothing in them, now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem.[20]

Yes, we, the readers, get to know these women directly from the explanatory recounter. The narrator describes the heroine of each novel, offering unrefutable profile and definition of the characters.

Arrestingly, Elizabeth Bennet is an exception. The narrator does not introduce Elizabeth when she appears. Instead, we know what kind of person she is by the medium of utterances of the characters in the novel. The most impressive introduction of Elizabeth is by Darcy: 'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me'.[21] We get information on Elizabeth's appearance through this rather uncaring and unflattering remark. Later on, the vivid charm of her eyes is talked about by Darcy himself. The readers get to know her charming vividness through the eyes' enchantment of Darcy. Before that, in earlier chapter in the novel, her parents give

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p. 13.

[18] Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

[19] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Barbara M. Benedict and Deirdre Le Faye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 5.

[20] Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, ed. Janet M. Todd and Antje Blank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 6.

[21] Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*: p. 12.

us her sketch: according to Mrs Bennet, 'Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia', while Mr Bennet thinks 'Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters', which he values, saying that he 'must throw in a good word for' his 'little Lizzy' when somebody wants to marry one of his daughters.[22] The narrator is notably silent about her basic information.

Conclusion

Doing justice to oneself as well as to others keeps people's relationship sound and constructive and holds the society together. The euphoria that Austen's novels offer is connected with moral judgement as focused in books and articles of Austin-Bolt, Soni and Emsley, among other recent studies. But judgement only is not enough. When suitable moral judgement is shown, told, and executed in the form of actions, that is, when turning the judgement into action, or when a reasonable creature knows oneself and, if necessary, overrules their former decision with integrity, the reader feels gratified, happy and contented. The workings of 'doing justice' is so versatile that it not only justifies the gap between the fortunes of Elizabeth and Darcy by their mutual recognition of each other's disposition and talents. It is the moment of justice being done to the characters by the manipulation of events by the author. I hope, by finding out the importance of 'doing justice', I have done my share of a little bit of justice to the cherished work of Jane Austen.

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———. *Mansfield Park.* edited by John Wiltshire Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

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———. *Persuasion.* edited by Janet M. Todd and Antje Blank Cambridge: Cam-

[22] Ibid., pp. 5, 4-5.

bridge University Press, 2006.

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