

A Publication of the
JANE AUSTEN SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

2013 JASNA Essay Contest First Place Winner College/University Division
Prashansa Taneja
Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi
New Delhi, India

Lovers of their Time: Untimeliness in *Pride and Prejudice*

Pride and Prejudice derives much of its timeless quality from Austen's portrayal of the limitation of human plans and wishes against untimely moments. The novel explores the universal theme of how delay, premature action and misunderstanding can alter the course of our lives and define our relationships with others. Samuel Johnson gives two definitions of the word 'timeless' in his famous dictionary. Both differ surprisingly from the currently accepted definition; the first is "unseasonable; done at an improper time", and the second, "untimely; immature; done before the proper time." Johnson's now antiquated definitions give us a lens through which to view how untimeliness propels the narrative in the novel.

Throughout the novel, Austen contrives delays and conflicts, and lets her characters indulge in precipitate actions. When Mr. Bennet remarks that "Kitty has no discretion in her coughs...she times them ill" (8), it is only the first and least important of the many instances of inopportuneness to follow that will accelerate the events leading up to Darcy and Elizabeth's union. Elizabeth's antipathy towards Darcy is also a result of disastrous timing; she is forced to sit down for two dances because of a scarcity of partners, and "during part of that time" Darcy happens to be standing near her. She overhears him as he brushes off Bingley's suggestion to dance with her: "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*...." (13). Bad timing, therefore, becomes an effective plot device. Austen cleverly delays the moment of Darcy and Elizabeth's coming together by putting innumerable impediments in their way which will test the strength of their character and love. By the end of the novel the reader has no

reason to doubt that, despite their initial dislike for each other, they are perfect for each other.

Late in the novel, in the forty-sixth chapter, the narrative becomes charged with the opposing forces of delay and urgency. Elizabeth receives two letters at once from Jane about Lydia's elopement because the first one had been misdirected. We are told that the first letter "had been written five days ago" (260), and so Elizabeth's sense of urgency is amplified by the delay the misdirected letter has produced. She wants to return to Longbourn with her aunt and uncle "without losing a moment of the time so precious" (263). The reader has scarcely begun to hope that Darcy and Elizabeth will come together, now that Elizabeth has seen the natural majesty of Pemberley and reassessed her feelings about its owner, when Lydia elopes with the very man Mr. Darcy hates the most. Just as Elizabeth charges out of her seat to look for her uncle, Mr. Darcy appears, it is very likely, to renew his proposal of marriage.

Austen seems to be saying that unpropitious moments have the power to trample upon our happiness. This chapter is full of words and phrases that convey Elizabeth's hurriedness: "business that cannot be delayed" (263), "not an instant to lose," "impetuous manner," "wild to be at home" (266) etc. Elizabeth makes a spontaneous confession to Darcy, which she regrets later when Lydia's marriage gives "the proper termination to the elopement" (295). Elizabeth's conversation with Wickham about Darcy at the Philips' is a warning against precipitate conversations, yet Austen does not create a simple binary. Hasty confessions are not always bad; the precipitance of Lydia's elopement makes Darcy hurry off to look for them. He later tells Elizabeth that "his resolution of following her from Derbyshire in quest of her sister had been formed before he quitted the inn" (350). It is this that eventually brings him and Elizabeth together.

After hearing a rumor that Elizabeth and Darcy are engaged, Lady Catherine assumes too quickly that Elizabeth is unworthy of her nephew, and rushes off to tell her so. Her next stop is London, where she tells Darcy that Elizabeth has stubbornly refused to promise that she would not marry him. However, Lady Catherine's impetuosity has a favorable outcome for the heroine. Darcy learns through her that Elizabeth has not "irrevocably decided against" him, and begins to cherish the hope of making a successful second proposal to her (347). Similarly, Lydia babbles out the secret that Mr. Darcy was present at her wedding, chatting away heedlessly as is her wont. Her careless disclosure puts Elizabeth in a flurry. She writes to her aunt immediately to learn what Darcy was doing there, and Mrs. Gardiner's reply makes clear the nature of his involvement in Lydia's wedding. As Elizabeth

later tells Darcy: “Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter....” (346).

Austen extends the idea of bad timing to her descriptions of her characters in order to expose their lack of manners and weaknesses. Mr. Collins does not take more than a few seconds to shift his matrimonial gaze onto Elizabeth when he comes to know that the eldest Miss Bennet's affections are already reserved for Mr. Bingley. He will make Charlotte Lucas his next victim just as quickly. We are told: “Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire” (70). Austen brings together in this hilarious turn of phrase, two people who are similar not only in their plans for Elizabeth but also in their abysmal sense of timing. Mrs. Bennet jeopardizes her eldest daughter's chance of marrying Mr. Bingley by revealing her mercenary intentions in Mr. Darcy's hearing at the supper table at Netherfield, and embarrasses her family by maneuvering their carriage to arrive “a quarter of an hour after everybody else was gone” (100).

More subtle is Austen's early hint at Mr. Bingley's spinelessness in deserting Jane at the persuasion of his sisters and Mr. Darcy. Bingley says that everything he does “is done in a hurry,” and that he “should probably be off in five minutes” if he were to decide to quit Netherfield on a whim (42). He is shown to be a disorganized and careless letter-writer, saying, “My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to express them” (47). However, Austen is not too severe on him, and when Elizabeth meets him in Lambton, he is quick to remind her of when he last met Jane: “It is above eight months. We have not met since the 26th of November, when we were all dancing together at Netherfield.” Elizabeth, as well as the reader, is “pleased to find his memory so exact” (250)—he must truly love Jane because time has gone by slowly for him while he was away from her. Lydia on the other hand has lost track of time while she was leading a life of dissipation with Wickham; the period of three months she has been away from Longbourn seems to her “but a fortnight” (299).

The idea of un-timeliness in the novel can also be applied to the individual's refusal to adhere to society's expectations and established norms. It is Elizabeth's “most country town indifference to decorum” that sets her apart from the ladies at Netherfield; she does not shy away from walking three miles and turning up with her petticoat “six inches deep in mud” to see her unwell sister (36). At Netherfield, she chooses reading over playing cards with people whose company she does not like, and prefers “a plain dish to a ragout” at the dinner table (35). She is also the only person to lament the wrongness of

Lydia's marriage to Wickham. Elizabeth points out the vulgarity of a society which encourages the marriage of a girl of sixteen with a libertine who never intended to marry her, so as to preserve her respectability: "And they are really to be married! ... How strange this is! And for *this* we are to be thankful. That they should marry, small as is their chance of happiness, and wretched as is his character, we are forced to rejoice. Oh, Lydia!" (288).

The authorial voice, too, mocks this preoccupation with the preservation of reputation that traps Lydia in a loveless marriage: "His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her" (366). Elizabeth shows her characteristic perceptiveness in attributing Lydia's actions to her youth and inexperience, and not her sinfulness: "But she is very young; she has never been taught to think on serious subjects...She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came in her way" (269). She is grieving over her sister's misfortune when she tells Wickham that Georgiana Darcy "has got over the most trying age" (310), something Lydia was never given the opportunity to do.

Unlike the Bennets, and the rest of Meryton that thinks that marriage, prostitution and going into seclusion are the only options before Lydia in her situation, Elizabeth shows herself ahead of her time by placing individual happiness over social respectability. Darcy is of one mind with her. On finding out Wickham's whereabouts, he tries to dissuade Lydia from marrying him. Darcy is not as unimaginative as the Bennets, and believes that an alternative to marrying Wickham can be arranged. It is only when she shows her typical foolishness in refusing to leave Wickham's side, that Darcy is forced to rush their marriage:

His first object with her, he acknowledged, had been to persuade her to quit her present disgraceful situation, and return to her friends as soon as they could be prevailed on to receive her, offering his assistance, as far as it would go. But he found Lydia absolutely resolved on remaining where she was...Since such were her feelings, it only remained, he thought, to secure and expedite a marriage.... (305)

Darcy, too, is bound by the rigid social forces that seek to curtail private independence by placing immense value on name, position and wealth. His mother and Lady Catherine de Bourgh planned his marriage to the sickly Anne de Bourgh during their infancy. The family is often a violent institution in the

novel, in that it almost never takes the individual's consent into account. But Elizabeth voices what Darcy cannot say directly to his aunt: "You both did as much as you could in planning the marriage. Its completion depended on others. If Mr. Darcy is neither by honour nor inclination confined to his cousin, why is not he to make another choice?" (336). Darcy's contempt for societal control is visible in his decision to cut off contact with Lady Catherine de Bourgh when she abuses Elizabeth in her letter. His love of Elizabeth helps him overcome his initial self-consciousness about hierarchies which marred his first proposal. For Elizabeth's sake, he doesn't mind bearing the relation of brother-in-law to Wickham.

The delays that push events in the novel could have taken a grim direction had not Austen determinedly kept the tone lively. Mr. Bennet puts off correcting Lydia's manners so that she becomes an incorrigible flirt. Delay in expressing love is often a space which grows in the shape of assumptions about the other person—what Elizabeth calls "a gulf impassable" (295). At Hunsford, Darcy assumes that Elizabeth doesn't like to travel or stay away from Longbourn. At the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth has no reason to think that her taste in books is very different from Darcy's, yet she tells him: "I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings" (92). Most delays result from constraints of the manners of the time, which prevent Darcy and Elizabeth from telling each other that they have started to feel differently for each other. What can two young people talk about when they want to say "I like you" but they cannot? After their chance meeting at Pemberley, as Elizabeth and Darcy wait for the Gardiners to walk up to the carriage, there seems to be "an embargo on every subject": "At such a time much might have been said, and silence was very awkward." They must find topics of conversation, so they talk about Elizabeth's travels to Matlock and Dove Dale "with great perseverance." But they are soon bored and run out of things to say: "Yet time and her aunt moved slowly—and her patience and her ideas were nearly worn out before the tete-a-tete was over" (246).

Their fortuitous meeting is the result of a delightful combination of delay, mistiming and earliness. Elizabeth's "tour of pleasure" of the Lake District with her aunt and uncle is delayed by four weeks, and because her uncle has business to attend to in London, they must shorten their itinerary and go only as far as Derbyshire. Elizabeth agrees to go to Pemberley only after confirming from the chambermaid at the inn that Darcy is away. At Pemberley, she is relieved to hear from Mrs. Reynolds the housekeeper that Darcy will return only the next day: "How rejoiced was Elizabeth that their own journey had not by any circumstance been delayed a day!" (236). But little does she

know that Darcy will return a few hours early on account of “business with his steward” (245). Untimely moments can breed misunderstanding, but unexpected rendezvous and mistiming may present opportunities we had never imagined. As Elizabeth considers in a moment of free indirect discourse: “Had they been only ten minutes sooner, they should have been beyond the reach of his discrimination....” (242). In a world where marital felicity is rare, and declarations of feelings hampered by time and custom, a chance encounter like this is all two young people can hope for.

The timeless and the untimely are significantly linked in the novel. Human experience is confined by the caprices of time and, other people’s sense of timing, as much as our own, can affect our happiness. Elizabeth knows that she owes her present happiness to the sudden change in their itinerary, and writes to her aunt: “I thank you, again and again, for not going to the Lakes” (361). In the novel, Austen employs her keen sense of un-timing to show that as little as ten minutes’ delay can be crucial in deciding our future. Jane Bennet observes to her mother that “one day’s delay...would be of small importance” (290)—but in the world of the novel, delay and untimeliness govern everything.

Works Cited

“timeless.” *A Dictionary of the English Language: A Digital Edition of the 1755 Classic by Samuel Johnson*. 6 Dec. 2012. Web. 30 Apr. 2013.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Vivien Jones. London: Penguin, 1996. Print.