From *Cecilia to Pride and Prejudice*: “What becomes of the moral?”

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As all good Janeites know, the revised title that Jane Austen gave to her own darling child, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), originally called *First Impressions*, came from the final chapter of *Cecilia; or, Memoirs of an Heiress*, Frances Burney’s celebrated 1782 novel. Or did it? For, while scholars have long identified links between *Cecilia and Pride and Prejudice*, today some also recognize that those words of Austen’s title were more common and current than previously believed, so it may no longer be a truth universally acknowledged that Austen’s second published novel pays tribute to, or revises elements of, Burney’s second published novel. Still, these two novels remain linked in the minds of many readers, or at least, among those millions of readers of *Pride and Prejudice* who have heard of Burney’s *Cecilia* and who acknowledge Austen’s great regard for Burney.

In 1813, of course, Miss Burney, or Madame d’Arblay as she was known by then, was famous, had been famous for decades, with three best-selling novels to her credit, while Miss J. Austen was an obscure spinster living in a Hampshire cottage and known only to her immediate circle of family and friends. Austen’s fame, however, has fared better over the ensuing two hundred years than has Burney’s. While *Pride and Prejudice* today has become a popular, much-beloved, iconic novel, *Cecilia* remains very much of its time. Sadly, Burney’s novel, a powerful, savage indictment of the disordered society it portrays, is read mostly by eighteenth-century specialists, or by those who wish to read what Jane Austen read. This bicentenary of the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* provides an occasion to revisit the relationship between two great novels published a generation apart but connected by those three magic words, “pride and prejudice.”

*Cecilia*, a long, formally intricate novel, with many characters, subplots, and settings, offers a complex thematic treatment of the uses of wealth and the abuses of patriarchy, but, like Austen’s later novel, it is also a love story. The essential marriage plot concerns the eponymous heroine Cecilia Beverley who, orphaned at a young age, inherits one respectable fortune from her father, a wealthy gentleman-farmer, and a far greater second one from her guardian, her uncle the Dean, who dies when she is twenty, just before the novel opens and just a few month short of her legal coming-of-age. In consequence, Cecilia—beautiful, thoughtful, intelligent, and compassionate—enters London society still subject to the authority of three guardians, carefully chosen by her uncle to provide for her emotional, social, and financial well-being. The first, Mr. Harrell, is a fashionable, extravagant young man married to Cecilia’s dearest school friend, whom the Dean hoped would provide Cecilia with a comfortable home. The second guardian, Mr. Delvile, a shallow, selfish gentleman inordinately proud of his ancient lineage, despite his crumbling estate and his lack of any other talents to recommend him, was intended by Cecilia’s uncle to assure her the social patronage of an ancient family. The third, Mr. Briggs, is a shrewd, coarse, grotesquely miserly man of business, whom the Dean trusted to guard and to grow Cecilia’s great fortune. The only stipulation for her receiving that splendid fortune is that her husband, should she marry, must take her surname, “Beverley.”

Despite her preference for domestic, charitable, and intellectual pursuits, Cecilia is dragged into decadent London society by the Harrells. She is horrified by their heedless, selfish extravagance, initially refusing to enable their madness but vulnerable to their emotional blackmail when the Harrells are faced with bailiffs or when Mr. Harrell threatens suicide. Cecilia, like so many Burney heroines, is thus entrapped into double and triple binds despite her sound principles and good judgment. Eventually she is manipulated into mortgaging her smaller inheritance from her father in order to underwrite the Harrells, while her own generosity commits her to many charitable expenses, thus whittling down her large income and forcing her to treat with money-lenders.

Meanwhile, early in her London career, Cecilia meets Mr. Delvile’s only son, Mortimer, at a masquerade, where he rescues her from unwanted attentions. They quickly fall in love. The required name change, however, is an unacceptable condition for the proud Delviles, and they are too cash poor to permit Mortimer to marry a woman with neither family nor fortune, as Cecilia would be were she to marry Mortimer without his taking the name “Beverley.” Seeking refuge from the
Harrells, Cecilia lives for a while with the Delviles at Devile Hall: dark, cold, and decayed, like the family. Mrs. Delvile, a flawed character with elements of nobility, has a far more intense relationship with Cecilia than her son does. She and Cecilia come to love and admire one another, even though she forces the lovers to promise never to see each other.

After more than four volumes of vicissitudes (including some lurid gothic incidents of the sort that Catherine Morland so wisely observed happen only in books), Cecilia finally comes into her uncle’s fortune and proves her competence to administer her own estate. In one of the novel’s many subplots, she acts as wise patron to several dependents, including a rather silly Harriet-Smith-like girl. Cecilia lives comfortably, even liberally, on her estate, employing her great income not for extravagant show and indulgent pleasure, but for rational, charitable works. All she lacks is love.

Cynically, Mr. Delvile now permits Mortimer to marry her if she agrees to give up her uncle’s fortune, retaining only the smaller one from her father as a modest dowry. This stipulation is nasty because he knows, as Mortimer does not, that the smaller fortune has all gone to money-lenders. Mrs. Delvile and Mortimer don’t mind the loss, however—they were too proud to give up their family name in order to gain Cecilia with her vast wealth, but Mortimer is happy to take her without a penny so long as he keeps his name: like King Lear’s Cordelia, Cecilia is herself a dowry. Only by changing her own name and giving up her identity as “an heiress” will Cecilia be able to marry the man she loves.

Mrs. Delvile, appalled by her husband’s belief in false slanders against Cecilia, now urges the lovers to marry in secret, without Mr. Delvile’s blessing. Having promised to obey Mrs. Delvile, Cecily reluctantly agrees to this secret marriage against her own principles of filial duty. The marriage performed, Mortimer sets out to accompany his ailing mother abroad, not knowing that the next heir to Cecilia’s fortune has discovered the secret marriage and expelled her from her estate, rendering her homeless and penniless. Her three guardians between them have thus driven Cecilia into guilt, poverty, isolation, and, eventually, madness, for the distracted Cecilia seeks refuge with her proud father-in-law, Mr. Delvile, and when he rejects her, Lear-like she loses her wits, eventually taking humble shelter in a pawn shop colorfully called “The Three Blue Balls.”

There she languishes, dying of a fever, her deathbed surrounded by kneeling admirers who venerate her saintliness and pray for her quick release, and there she is discovered by frantic Mortimer. He desperately sends for the Delvile family’s wise physician, Dr. Lyster, who restores Cecilia to health, if not wealth, and effects a reconciliation with Mr. Delvile, temporarily remorseful when he sees the dying Cecilia. In the sentence so often cited as the inspiration for Austen’s title, Dr. Lyster pronounces the novel’s ironic moral to the penitent lovers: “[I]f to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination” (931). Mortimer and Cecilia live happily ever after, doing good works and inheriting new fortunes from admiring relations.

Apart from the common phrase, then, Cecilia and Pride and Prejudice share only two elements. First, both heroines are courted by a man whose family pride revolts against their match, and second, both novels offer an ironic version of a moral. So far they are equal. In Cecilia, Dr. Lyster pronounces this ironic moral to the penitent lovers. Austen is similarly playful in uniting her lovers, although without a magisterial Dr. Lyster to negotiate a truce. Instead, Elizabeth Bennet herself characteristically mocks conventional novel moralizing in her teasing conversation with her new fiancé, Fitzwilliam Darcy, while Darcy, like Dr. Lyster, suggests that the faulty behavior of those who had tried to separate the lovers has also served to unite them: “The moral will be perfectly fair,” he assures Elizabeth. “Lady Catherine’s unjustifiable endeavours to separate us, were the means of removing all my doubts” (423).

Apart from these two similarities, however, the differences of plot and character are striking. Thus Cecilia is heiress to a great fortune while Elizabeth is practically portionless. Cecilia is an orphan whereas Elizabeth is blessed with a beloved sister and burdened with a large, embarrassing family. Elizabeth despises Darcy until at least halfway through the novel while Cecilia early on admires and loves Mortimer. Mortimer is caught between his love for Cecilia and his duty to his parents while Darcy contends only with his own pride. Cecilia herself is scrupulously deferential to the Mortimer family’s opposition to their marriage, extolling the virtues of filial obedience. She is therefore vulnerable to anyone who invokes claims of duty, honor, and gratitude, and she promises Mrs. Delvile never to marry Mortimer. Elizabeth, in contrast, wittily defies Lady Catherine’s snobbish intervention, refusing to give such a promise, declaring, “Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude . . . have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either, would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy” (397).

Cecilia, in short, is an exemplary woman who strives to make her immediate world a better place but who is wronged by powerful forces beyond her control, her own honesty and generosity levered against her by selfish, unscrupulous people. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet, although she must contend with relative poverty and an embarrassing family, does not face the same powerful, systemic patriarchal scheming that entraps Cecilia, nor does she share Cecilia’s noble aims and delicate scruples. She is in fact an altogether tougher specimen: sassing back her critics, refusing to be blackmailed into acting against her own interests or values, and standing up to authority when authority forfeits all right to respect. Indeed, unlike Cecilia (and Mr. Darcy), Elizabeth is not a philanthropist, and while she usually behaves with honesty, generosity, grace, and affection, her attempts to be uncommonly clever by pursuing an opening for wit sometimes cause her to be unjust.
A second key distinction is Austen's insistence on the obligation of her characters to re-read "texts" (including people and events) and to revise their judgments: an activity in which this novel, like all of Austen's, also implicates its readers. In Pride and Prejudice, for example, the narrator simply describes Darcy's fairly rapid revision of his initial view of Elizabeth, but as readers we actually participate in Elizabeth's subsequent experience of reading and re-reading Darcy's letter, consequently revising our judgment along with Elizabeth. Throughout the novel Austen contrasts such a rigorous process of revision with the casual, unfounded shifts of opinion ascribed to "all Meryton." Indeed, Austen's title for her earlier, epistolary version, First Impressions, suggests that this novel was originally constructed to illustrate the necessity of reflecting upon the sources of, and if necessary revising, our first impressions.

The phrase itself was commonplace. For example, Humphry Repton's writings on picturesque landscape design, first published in 1795 and 1803 while Austen was composing and revising First Impressions, stress the necessity of analyzing the sources of those impressions: "In judging the character of any place to which I am a stranger, I very minutely observe the first impression it makes upon my mind, and, comparing it with subsequent impressions, I inquire into the causes which may have rendered my first judgement erroneous" (12). Repton also acknowledges the persistence of erroneous first impressions: "We frequently decide on the character of places, as well as of persons, with no other knowledge of either than what is acquired by the first glance of their most striking features; and it is with difficulty or with surprise that the mind is afterwards constrained to adopt a contrary opinion" (172). In a sense, Pride and Prejudice is Austen's equivalent of one of Repton's famous "Red Books," which show the "before" view of an "improved" estate overlaid with the "after" view. For Austen, as for Repton, the interest is in how we get from "before" to "after." Austen's "moral" is not a specific, prescriptive lesson to be taught through the exempla of the plot and summed up in a sentence or to extend the Repton analogy) presented as a finished, perfected landscape. Rather, it is a process that demands of both heroine and reader careful engagement with the text, serious reflection upon the sources of our judgment, and rigorous, transforming examination of self.

Austen's innovative approach is reflected in the difference between the ironic "morals" of Cecilia and Pride and Prejudice. In the final chapter of Cecilia, Dr. Lyster embarks upon shuttle diplomacy between the young married lovers and the hostile paterfamilias, Mr. Delvile, who, as Cecilia recovers from her near-death experience, revives his belief in those false slanders against her. Dr. Lyster, armed with a formal retraction and apology from the slanderer, tries to convince Mr. Delvile of Cecilia's unspotted virtue and to win his blessing upon the match. He does so, cleverly, by appealing not to nobler sentiments (for Mr. Devile has none) but rather to Mr. Delvile's inflated family pride: if he does not care about Cecilia's welfare, he ought to care about the welfare of the daughter-in-law who bears his precious family name and may one day bear his heir:

His conference with Dr. Lyster was long and painful, but decisive: that sagacious and friendly man knew well how to work upon his passions, and so effectually awakened them by presenting the disgrace of his own family from the present situation of Cecilia [who is still in the pawnshop], that before he quitted his house he was authorized to invite her to remove to it. (929, my emphasis)

To sort out some of those confusing pronouns, Dr. Lyster persuades Mr. Delvile, by appealing to his family pride, to invite Cecilia to move from the Three Blue Balls to the Delvile's townhouse.

Proud Mortimer is outraged by his father's grudging concession: "Is this all the grace accorded me?" he asks (930), but Dr. Lyster counsels patience:

[When you have thwarted any body in their first hope and ambition, do you expect they will send you their compliments and many thanks for the disappointment? Pray let the good gentleman have his way in some little matters, since you have taken such effectual care [by marrying] to put out of his reach the power of having it in greater. (930)

Cecilia, too, advises Mortimer to accept his father's gesture: "The misery of DISOBEDIENCE we have but too fatally experienced; and thinking as we think of filial ties and parental claims, how can we ever hope happiness till forgiven and taken into favour?" (930). The young lovers are finally reconciled with the angry parent.

At this point, Dr. Lyster makes his "PRIDE and PREJUDICE" speech, and significantly, he attributes those qualities not to the lovers, but rather, to the parents and guardians who have tried to thwart the natural consummation of youthful love:
"The whole of this unfortunate business," said Dr. Lyster, "has been the result of PRIDE and PREJUDICE. Your uncle, the dean, began it, by his arbitrary will, as if an ordinance of his own could arrest the course of nature! and as if he had the power to keep alive, by the loan of a name, a family in the male branch already extinct. [Cecilia is the last of the Beverleys.] Your father, Mr. Mortimer, continued it with the same self-partiality, preferring the wretched gratification of tickling his ear with a favourite sound [i.e., his name, Delvile] to the solid happiness of his son with a rich and deserving wife. Yet this, however, remember; if to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination: for all that I could say to Mr. Delvile, either of reasoning or entreaty,—and I said all I could suggest, and I suggested all a man need wish to hear,—was totally thrown away, till I pointed out to him his own disgrace, in having a daughter-in-law immured in these mean lodgings! . . .

"Such, my good young friends, is the MORAL of your calamities." (930-31)

This is the stuff of Shakespearean comedy: the struggle between powerful, rigid elders and the powerless youth whose natural appetites and ambitions eventually triumph over their elders. Both the dead Dean and the nearly dead Mr. Delvile were guilty of family pride, of valuing a mere name over the substance of virtue, love, and great wealth. Their attempts at control threatened the natural course of love. The impasse was resolved by Dr. Lyster’s clever appeal to the same family pride that had caused all the complications. Just as Cecilia’s generous virtues were used by the bad characters as levers to destroy her, so Mr. Delvile’s faults are levered by Dr. Lyster to change his mind. Thus the moral of Burney’s novel condemns the faults of those whose misguided values had thwarted the heroine and her lover, suggesting that such errors may ultimately be self-defeating.

How different, then, is Austen’s later use of the terms “pride” and “prejudice” in Pride and Prejudice. Critics will always argue (no universal truths here) exactly whose pride and whose prejudices are at work in the novel, but the current critical consensus sees both Elizabeth and Darcy exhibiting each trait to a greater or lesser degree. Darcy’s pride, and his prejudice against small town assemblies, prompts him to reject Elizabeth as a dance partner. Elizabeth’s pride is piqued by that insult, thus creating her initial prejudice against him, quickly reinforced by her crush on Wickham. In Vol. II, Chapter 13, as Elizabeth reads and re-reads Darcy’s letter, however, she recognizes her own culpability: “Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd” (230). Readers of Pride and Prejudice who share Elizabeth’s active process of re-reading and revision may also acknowledge their own faulty judgment. To quote Elizabeth’s later remarks to Darcy, “The conduct of [none of us], if strictly examined, will be irreproachable . . .” (408).

Elizabeth’s pride and courage stand her in good stead later, however, when she faces off against Lady Catherine. Her pride is not cowed; rather, she asserts, “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (395). Unlike Cecilia, she will not be bullied, manipulated, or blackmailed into promising never to marry Darcy: “I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. . . . You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these” (395-96). In fairness to Cecilia, of course, Elizabeth does not face the desperate forced-choice dilemmas that bedevil Burney heroines. The bailiffs are not at the door, nor does Lady Catherine point a pistol at her own breast. Indeed, Lady Catherine has no natural authority or power over Elizabeth, no means of leverage. In Austen’s novel, the stakes are far less desperate than in Burney’s. Elizabeth’s natural pride proves sufficient to resist Lady Catherine.

Lady Catherine’s interference, like Mr. Delvile’s inordinate family pride, is an instance of what Aristotle calls peripeteia, or “reversal,” often but not accurately translated as “reversal of fortune.” It really means “reversal of intention,” something closer to our own term, “dramatic irony.” Aristotle defines it: “A reversal is a change of the actions to their opposite, as we said, and that, as we are arguing, in accordance with probability or necessity. E.g., in the Oedipus, the man who comes to bring delight to Oedipus, and to rid him of his terror about his mother, does the opposite by revealing who Oedipus is . . .” (3.4.1, 14). Just so does Lady Catherine achieve the opposite of her intention when she exhorts Elizabeth to promise never to marry Mr. Darcy. Pride and Prejudice qualifies as a complex plot according to Aristotle’s definition since Lady Catherine’s actions have the causal effect (opposite to the intended effect) of bringing Darcy back to Netherfield.

A few days after Mr. Darcy returns with Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth’s courage again serves to precipitate the éclaircissement. When Kitty, Elizabeth, and Mr. Darcy go out walking behind newly-engaged Jane and Mr. Bingley, “Elizabeth was secretly forming a desperate resolution.” After Kitty drops off to visit the Lucases, Elizabeth went boldly on with him alone. Now was the moment for her resolution to be executed, and, while her courage was high, she immediately said,

“Mr. Darcy, I am a very selfish creature; and, for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings, care not how much I may be concerning your’s. I can no longer help thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister.” (405)

Elizabeth thus acts “boldly” to execute her “desperate resolution” while “her courage was high.” This transgressive but courageous act gives Darcy both the cue and the encouragement to respond, “I thought only of you,” and to renew his
The theatre curtain speech:

Paired couples as if upon a stage apron to take their bows. She speaks the last lines of the novel in the form of a peripeteia, since it provides the occasion for Darcy's rescue of Lydia as an offering of love for Elizabeth, which in turn prompts her courageous thanks—the act which precipitates his second proposal. Indeed, the true obstacles to their union all along have not been external interference and events but rather their own complex temperaments.

But in truth, Lady Catherine has never really presented a serious obstacle to their union. Cecilia Beverley's difficulties are triggered by morally and financially bankrupt authorities and scheming dissemblers who repeatedly force her to choose between a brace of bad options, leaving her little room for free agency. In Austen's novel, in contrast, the conflicts and challenges that the lovers face are largely internal: they must each learn to doubt themselves, to have the integrity to re-read one another other and the courage to change their minds. Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine may each appear to threaten such a match, but Darcy has early on decided to propose to Elizabeth despite her vulgar mother, and Lady Catherine ends by helping rather than harming their mutual understanding. Even Lydia's elopement, which Elizabeth assumes will destroy any possibility of Darcy renewing his offer, proves in fact to be another example of peripeteia, since it provides the occasion for Darcy's rescue of Lydia as an offering of love for Elizabeth, which in turn prompts her courageous thanks—the act which precipitates his second proposal. Indeed, the true obstacles to their union all along have not been external interference and events but rather their own complex temperaments.

Later, when Elizabeth playfully asks Mr. Darcy why he had been "so unwilling to come to the point at last," they both admit that they had been too embarrassed to speak when reunited at Longbourn (422). Elizabeth's courageous speech broke the impasse. Later she speculates: "I wonder how long you would have gone on, if you had been left to yourself. I wonder when you would have spoken, if I had not asked you!" (422). Elizabeth is teasing, of course, but it is true that her breaking of the embarrassed silence precipitates Darcy's second proposal, the one that she had already decided to accept. That happy outcome prompts her joke about the moral:

"My resolution of thanking you for your kindness to Lydia had certainly great effect. Too much, I am afraid; for what becomes of the moral, if our comfort springs from a breach of promise, for I ought not to have mentioned the subject? This will never do."

"You need not distress yourself. The moral will be perfectly fair. Lady Catherine's unjustifiable endeavours to separate us, were the means of removing all my doubts." (422-23)

In this passage Darcy, sharing the joke with Elizabeth, playfully appears to draw the same moral as Dr. Lyster did: that the repressive behavior of the old, attempting to thwart the lovers, has instead united them.

Significantly, however, in Austen's novel no Dr. Lyster has to work the trick. Elizabeth has done most of the work herself: first, by having the integrity to revise her opinions; second, by having the pride and courage to talk back to Lady Catherine; and third, by ignoring conventional "morality" in order to thank Mr. Darcy. We should recall that Jane Austen stresses Elizabeth's courage, describing her resolution as "desperate," her courage as "high," and her action as "bold." In an earlier novel, Sense and Sensibility, strong-minded Elinor is severely constrained by her moral obligation to respect a confidence, even though Lucy Steele had shared her secret in bad faith in order to bind Elinor. In Pride and Prejudice, however, Elizabeth is prepared to break that courtesy-book rule about respecting confidence in order to thank Darcy for his beau geste. Darcy has done all the rest: by heroically rescuing Lydia, by ignoring Lady Catherine's advice, by returning to Elizabeth, he has proven the strength of his devotion. In Austen's novel, then, the hero and heroine both create and solve their own problems as a consequence of their intricate characters.

In 1813, it was uncommon for a heroine to play such an active role in resolving her own marriage plot. Austen had learned much from Richardson and Burney, and Elizabeth Bennet certainly inherits her intelligence, courage, and wit from their heroines, but Richardson's Pamela, Clarissa, and Harriet, and Burney's Evelina, Cecilia, and Camilla, all struggle with malevolent external forces beyond their capacity to affect or resist. Essentially innocent themselves in intention and desire, they are threatened with abduction, seduction, rape, and starvation, preyed upon by swindlers and scoundrels, victimized by families unwilling or unable to protect them, subject to calumny, fainting fits, and madness. Constrained by patriarchy and decorum as well as the stratagems of predators, their only defensive resources are their principles and integrity. Pride and Prejudice changes that paradigm, empowering its heroine, liberating her from the rules of eighteenth-century courtship-novel morality.

When revising First Impressions, Austen might have been influenced to make fun of conventional novel moralizing by reading Maria Edgeworth's 1801 novel Belinda. Belinda, like Elizabeth, is a bright, independent-minded, principled young lady launched upon the marriage market without family or fortune. She is surrounded by bad patrons and advisors and pursued by several young men. Like Elizabeth, Belinda eventually triumphs by trusting to her own judgment. The real star of the novel, however, is her patroness, the dazzling, witty Lady Delacour, whom Belinda eventually rescues from every kind of moral, social, and physical peril. In the concluding paragraphs, Lady Delacour assembles all of the newly paired couples as if upon a stage apron to take their bows. She speaks the last lines of the novel in the form of a theatrical curtain speech:

Now, lady Delacour, to show that she is reformed, comes forward to address the audience with a
moral—a moral!—yes, Our tale contains a moral, and, no doubt, You all have wit enough to find it out. (478)

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, apparently, the anxious moralizing of the eighteenth-century novel was becoming an object of satire.

Elizabeth and Darcy’s joke about the moral is something of an Austen trademark, beginning with the juvenilia, which are full of mock morals both implied and explicit. The final sentence of Northanger Abbey is a send-up of Cecilia’s speech about filial disobedience: “I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience” (261). The conclusion of Sense and Sensibility deliberately eschews moralizing poetic justice, since the narrator points out that Willoughby lives to enjoy the consolations of wealth for which he abandoned Marianne, while Elinor and Edward, although deserving, do not inherit great wealth from admiring relations. Mansfield Park does contain an explicit moral, or at least cites the lesson that Sir Thomas has learned by the end of the novel, for he comes to “acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure” (547), but the real moral is Fanny’s response to Henry Crawford’s appeal, “Your judgment is my rule of right.” She rejects responsibility for his conscience: “Oh, no!—do not say so! We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be” (478). With Emma, Austen appears to step right outside the frame of traditional novel morality, for Emma’s challenge is not to overcome specific perils but to learn how to negotiate life.

Persuasion goes even further in dismissing the relevance of a “moral.” In the penultimate chapter, Anne muses over the “the right and wrong” of her youthful decision to break off her engagement as advised by Lady Russell, concluding that while the advice itself might have been wrong, she had been right to follow it (267-68). By the end of Persuasion, Anne Elliot has no qualms about marrying Frederick Wentworth despite her father’s coldness. She’s done with sacrificing happiness to filial obedience. The final chapter opens with the narrator’s rhetorical question:

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it in to their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other’s ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth. (248)

Truth, then, even if it makes for bad morality, is the new standard to which Jane Austen will adhere, for, like Elizabeth Bennet, she is a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart. The moral, Pride and Prejudice assures us, will be perfectly fair, but it will also be complex, possibly even ambivalent. Above all, it will be true.

NOTES

1. The tradition that Pride and Prejudice is a revision of Cecilia began with Q. D. Leavis’s “A Critical Theory of Jane Austen’s Writings (I).” As recently as 2007 Shapard could claim, “the title of Pride and Prejudice probably derives from a critical passage in Cecilia” (xviii), but see also Rogers (xxxiv-xxxv) on the frequent use of that phrase in English letters, beginning with Goldsmith’s History in 1764.

2. In complex plots, according to Aristotle, events are not merely sequential but causal:

Among plots, some are simple, and some are complex; for the actions, of which plots are representations, are evidently of these kinds. By “simple,” I mean an action which is, as we have defined it, continuous in its course and single, where the transformation comes about without reversal or recognition. By “complex,” I mean an action as a result of which the transformation is accompanied by a recognition, a reversal or both. These should arise from the actual structure of the plot, so it happens that they arise either by necessity or by probability as a result of the preceding events. It makes a great difference whether these [events] happen only because of those or [only] after those.” (Poetics 3.3.3, 113-14)

Burney’s plots, so carefully constructed that a small gesture can spring a massive trap, are also complex, driven like Austen’s by psychology, but also by malevolent intrigue.

WORKS CITED

Pride and Prejudice is a romantic novel by author Jane Austen. Given here is a short summary of the famous novel. It is a fine blend of romance, with some very dramatic situations, and succeeds in making people believe that such a love story is possible. This novel is a personal favorite of the author herself. The opening lines to Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," grip the reader enough to make one follow through the entire novel.

Plot

Pride and Prejudice is the sto Description: Pride and Prejudice describes the unlikely courtship of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. Their relationship begins with mutual contempt, but moves forward as they mature and learn that their first impressions, based on pride and prejudice, were incorrect. The story is set in upper middle class English society at the beginning of the 19th century. Manufacturing and commerce had become increasingly efficient and profitable. Many manufacturers and merchants became very wealthy and a middle class of small business owners and professionals arose to serve the new economy. Pride and Prejudice and some of the other works by Jane Austen can be counted among these. Romeo and Juliet (1597) is another.