

The Courtship Novel
1740-1820
A FEMINIZED GENRE

Katherine Sobba Green



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luck." Whether one judges equality in marriage on the basis of money, family status, virtue, or affect, Sir Thomas has decidedly not met his equal in vapid Lady Bertram.

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), especially, the blazon becomes a recurrent trope whose attendant issues—unequal matches, conniving parents, and resistant daughters—shape the entire novel. Particularly significant are Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, two "maneuvers" (to borrow Edgeworth's word), whose encroaching voices menace those around them. Much as the reader understands the Bennets by their complicities and resistances to Mrs. Bennet, so the reader understands Lady Catherine de Bourgh's circle in relation to her. Both women represent versions of patriarchy, a pervasively influential but otherwise absent authority in the novel. Significantly, these maneuvering women body forth patriarchy against their sex, for in the absence of strong male characters it is their business to manage the traffic in women; it is they who adjudicate blazons.

A maneuverer in the extreme, Mrs. Bennet influences Austen's narrative voice, fixing the point of view from which the reader approaches the Bennet household. Hers is the ethic of the famous first lines: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. . . . this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters."³ Hers is the depreciation of affective relationships from which the reader repeatedly recoils: "A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls" (2). Mrs. Bennet assumes the attitude of a customer in an ill-stocked market, enlisting her husband in the competition by encouraging him to visit the eligible Mr. Bingley before their neighbors' daughters engross all the young bachelor's attention. From the subject position of a maneuvering mother, we understand the initial description of Darcy at the assembly: "Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year" (7). Darcy's blazon is devalued, and his attraction diminishes immediately, however, when the Bennets and their neighbors realize that his aristocratic pride will prevent his entering into any "exchange" with them. Thereafter, Mrs. Bennet's dislike of Darcy is settled until his taking Elizabeth off her hands surprises her into apology. In proportion to his fortune and possessions, Mr. Darcy becomes "charming" and Lizzy is "sweetest"; Mrs. Bennet reduces their marriage, as she has all the others, to ma-

terial terms—"pin-money," "jewels," "carriages," and "a house in town."

On Darcy's side, no less than on Lizzy's, there is a maneuvering woman, Lady Catherine. Our prepossession against her begins with Mr. Collins's visit. His constant reference to her as an absent authority on everything from chimneypieces to his own marriage comprises the first step in Austen's dismantling of his patriarchal and aristocratic figurehead. Collins's courtship visit to the Bennet household is one of many parodic shadows that surround the true courtships between Jane and Bingley and between Elizabeth and Darcy. But it also prepares for the later garden scene between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth. For Mr. Collins, the object is to find a wife, as Lady Catherine has advised. With little embarrassment, then, he transfers his suit from Jane to Elizabeth and finally to Charlotte Lucas. His formal rhetoric is of a piece with his studied compliments for Lady Catherine and, the reader suspects, is as interchangeable as the object of his intentions.⁴ Mr. Collins, fearing that he will be "run away with" by his feelings for Elizabeth, launches into his reasons for marrying as though he were arguing a case in court. It is clear from his subsequent speech that his third motive, Lady Catherine's "particular advice and recommendation," is most pressing and that his marriage is merely another studied compliment for his patron. He concludes his proposal with an ironic coupling of affection and fortune: "And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents. which will not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to" (96). Collins's inflated diction reveals the paucity of his affection and the fullness of his disappointment with Elizabeth's fortune.

In his inability to credit her refusal, Collins resorts more directly to the market patois, which has all along been his measure of the match. In effect, he calls out the blazon which should remind Elizabeth that he offers wares she cannot afford to refuse: "It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections with the family of De Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into farther consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small

that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications' (97-98). Collins's reminder of Elizabeth's inadequate bargaining position does not affect her decision, which, unlike his proposal, is individual and sincere: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart" (98).

Ironically, the next proposal Elizabeth receives also borrows its terms from Lady Catherine. Just as Collins's proposal betrayed its inadequacy by its conflicted rhetoric, so Darcy's first declaration reveals its insufficiency by a double-voicedness. Darcy's love for Elizabeth is sincere, but the language of family and class pride suffuses his proposal: "He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclinations, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit" (168). (Darcy's ardent love is undercut by the patriarchal considerations that invade his language.) His aunt's voice obtrudes, as it were, on his own sincere passion. His suit is a reminder that the language of trade is not reserved to one class. Like Collins's, Darcy's first proposal depends to no small degree on marriage market calculations, on the blazon by which he refers to Lizzy's connections as "inferior," and on that basis he anticipates (as he later admits) her acceptance of the offer.

Lizzy's reply, as in the earlier scene with Collins, simultaneously alludes to and rejects the commonly received wisdom and its formulaic language: "In such cases as this, it is, I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed" (169). Experiencing no gratitude, however, Lizzy expresses none. As the exchange becomes more heated, she diverges even further from the normative language of patriarchally ordered courtship, tracing her "disapprobation" to his "arrogance . . . conceit, and . . . selfish disdain of the feelings of others." Her dislike she characterizes as "immoveable": "I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry" (172). By the standards of her maneuvering mother or of Darcy's proud aunt, Elizabeth's answer, like Harriet Byron's to Sir Hargrave Pollexfen ("You do not . . . hit . . . my fancy"), is inexplicable.

Implicitly, in her divergence from marriage-market calculations and decorums, Austen's heroine recommends to the identificatory reader the new ethic for female behavior, the new subject position from which to consider societal wisdom about equal marriages. Before

the author can bring Elizabeth and Darcy to the point of seeing beyond "pride and prejudice," however, she must elaborate on the extent to which an individual woman may withstand the demands of patriarchy. This she does through the scene in which Lady Catherine confronts Lizzy with the rumor of her engagement to Darcy. Austen heightens the effect by the setting she chooses, the same copse to which Mr. Bennet, Jane, and Lizzy variously retreat when they are emotionally troubled. It is the copse in which Lizzy has just read her aunt's letter explaining Darcy's generous interventions in arranging the runaway Lydia's marriage.

Lady Catherine speaks with the vested authority of her family and class as she explains the prior engagement that exists between Darcy and her daughter: "From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favourite wish of his mother, as well as of hers. While in their cradles, we planned the union" (315). The agents for this exchange may be female, but its nature remains "patriarchal"—concerned not for individual good but for familial well-being. The transmission of property and status, but Lizzy denies the validity of this claim, despite the brandished weapons of patriarchy against her own marriage to Darcy—"honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it" (315). In frustration, Lady Catherine resorts, as had Collins and Darcy, to the calculated taxonomy of the blazon: "My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the father's, from respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled families. Their fortune on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune" (316).

The argument, forceful as it appears, is the predictable, the inflexible, authoritative word of patriarchy. To it, Lizzy returns several radical arguments. First, rejecting Lady Catherine's arguments for class endogamy ("descended . . . from the same noble line"), she insists that, as a gentleman's daughter, she is Darcy's equal.⁵ Lizzy questions Lady Catherine's premise that Darcy may be brought to marry Miss de Bourgh at all. Finally, Lizzy asserts that she will not be intimidated and that Lady Catherine has no right to interfere in her affairs: "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. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world, if the former *were* excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment's concern—and the world in general would have too much

sense to join in the scorn" (318). Lizzy's charged rhetoric and the stand she takes against patriarchal exchange mark her as a resistant figure worthy of emulation by young women readers of Austen's period.

Moreover, Lady Catherine's intended disruption of Lizzy's and Darcy's engagement is the very encouragement needed to bring the engagement on, for his aunt's account of the meeting proves to Darcy that he need not give up hope. Lizzy, he believes, would have acknowledged an irrevocable decision against him "frankly and openly." It is to her earlier candid refusal that he attributes his reform, explaining that he was spoiled from childhood, "allowed, encouraged, almost taught . . . to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own" (328). He is grateful for the humbling experience of his first proposal: "I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You shewed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased" (328). Darcy humbled is the patriarchy humbled, as his words make clear; Lizzy has taught him that the measure for marriage is no longer his blazon—his fortune and class prestige—but his "pleasing," which can only be assessed from her subjective point of view. Within the newer system of companionate marriage, the terms of the blazon are emptied of value.

Granted, as Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* so convincingly demonstrates, the sexual dynamics of Austen's novel—of all the courtship stories I have discussed—may be read as masking underlying class dynamics.⁶ But to read them solely in this way is both to undervalue the dynamic relationship between female writers and readers and to impose an anachronistic mistrust of the domestic on one's reading of eighteenth-century texts. After all, Austen and her predecessors in the courtship novel wrote long before women made up any appreciable part of the labor force, long before they had any political rights. To value their heroines according to their contexts, then, we must begin by understanding that in the eighteenth century, affective individualism—narrowly defined as the right of choosing a partner within heterosexual marriage—was a feminist cause.

If we love Lizzy best among Austen's heroines, though, it is not solely for the feminist subject position she delineates but also for her redemptive role in relation to Darcy, whom she leads out of the confines of pride into the new territory of rhetorical freedom. The change is especially marked in two scenes at the conclusion of the novel. In the first, when Lizzy calls for Darcy's explanation of his love, he attributes it to the "liveliness of her mind." As she rephrases it, he

was "disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone" (338). The passage marks Lizzy's difference, her individuality, as compared with the designing women Darcy has known. When they decide to announce their engagement to Lady Catherine, Lizzy teases, "And if I had not a letter to write myself, I might sit by you, and admire the evenness of your writing, as another young lady once did. But I have an aunt, too, who must not be longer neglected" (339-40). Lizzy distances herself from self-objectification, and by remembering that she too has a letter to write, she substitutes an active purposiveness for Miss Bingley's earlier passivity.

That Lizzy's verbal freedom makes a substantial change in Darcy's life, and that his conversion to more feminist and more egalitarian principles is to be lasting, is further evident in Austen's brief treatment of their life at Pemberley after marriage. From Georgiana's viewpoint, the change in her brother is startling: "At first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at her [Elizabeth's] lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry. Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself" (345). This we may understand as the real object lesson for Austen's readers; like Lizzy, they are to take liberties with the facade of patriarchy, to domesticate the Darceys of the world. Elizabeth does not "pollute" the shades of Pemberley, as Lady Catherine feared, but rather brings the utopian promise of the estate to fulfillment.