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Jane Austen's Epistolarity in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Jane Austen's letters contain insights into her practice or philosophy as a writer. While she is credited with embarking on her literary maturation by slowly abandoning epistolary tradition in the eighteenth century, Austen adopts this technique again and naturally weaves her series of letters into a dialogue and description of events. *Pride and Prejudice* is a notable instance, in which letters are used to tell the story, develop the characters and build the exposition of themes. Thus this paper delves into the role, purpose, and significance of letters in the novel. It is noted that the letters play a great part in revealing the characters, presenting the natural emotions, and enforcing the structure. The paper also explores Austen's choice of literary technique to declare the writer's intention to the audience. Austen's resurgent use of letters in *Pride and Prejudice* hints at her aesthetic preference for epistolarity, instead of rejection.

Keywords

Pride and Prejudice; epistolary style; letter.

1. Introduction

When Jane Austen began writing in the 1790s, novels in letters, often known as epistolary literature, were a popular genre. Whatever the issue, the epistolary style wears its themes and preoccupations on its sleeves and openly invites interpretation as correspondents read one other's behavior and ideas. *Pride and Prejudice*, originally published as a novel-in-letters in 1796-1797, reflects a culture of free discussion. Nonetheless, it is not the frequency or the numerical relevance that makes the letters important and virtually indispensable for Austen's novels. The letters indeed perform a range of functions and take on a variety of roles, thus contributing to the complexity and plasticity of her works. Yet so far, most scholars have focused on the ironic art, thematic concern or women's position in *Pride and Prejudice*, others misread Austen's developing narrative technique as the rejection of the epistolary mode. Thus, this paper aims to explore Austen's attitude to this literary tradition in *Pride and Prejudice* through a deeper reflection on the qualities of the letters, with a view to re-read this literary classic from a different perspective.

2. Jane Austen and the Novels-in-Letters Tradition

In the eighteenth century, writers have changed conceptions of correct style in letters by shifting away from the formal conventions and neoclassical ideals of Renaissance and Restoration epistolary dogma, and moving toward a looser, more emotive and expressive style(Epstein, 1985). The rhetoric of gallantry gave way to the language of sentimentality, and in this process the letter moved from the realm of official public discourse to a more private and intimate sphere, characterized by advice and seduction. Therefore, this movement from public to private, from oracular to conversational, from strained discourse to natural flow of thought and emotion brought the letter to the special attention of an array of female writers, including Jane Austen.

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It is well-known that Austen extensively examined Samuel Richardson's works, and inherited the familiar letter form in her earliest writings from its protean appearances in eighteenth-century conduct books, periodicals and didactic essays(Normandin, 2014). And the first two books she published, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, might be adaptations of epistolary novels written years ago. Although it is warned that since the manuscripts of the early versions are lacking, "any discussion of the nature of Austen's preference for the third-person over the epistolary mode remains highly speculative"(Davidson, 2008), some critics insinuate that the replacement of the epistolary fiction hints at the maturity for Austen's novels and the general merger of prose genres in the 18th century. Elisabeth Lenckos(2005) argues that Austen's works signify the end of the era of epistolary literature and the beginning of the new novel, which is marked by a more controlled and authorial perspective, as well as a natural-looking, realistic picture of human contact. According to Thomas Dutoit(2007), a important technological accomplishment in this shift is the invention of free indirect conversation——"through this contribution to English literature, Jane Austen raised prose fiction to the status of art, to *belles lettres*". And this literary innovation enables a narrator to seamlessly move in and out of a character's consciousness, as David Lodge(1986) posits that as more nuanced and adaptable techniques for expressing a character's thoughts and emotions in literary narrative emerged, Richardson's epistolary technique became outdated. He believes that, despite its attractions, epistolary fiction has substantial drawbacks, which may have caused Austen to leave it after some early experiments. Similarly, Susan Pepper Robbins(1989) argues that Austen's unique fusion of the epistolary novel and the narrated novel eventually left the book in letters an antiquated genre by 1800. And B. C. Southam(1964) remarks on the "disparate" quality of *Lady Susan*, Austen's last novel predominantly in letters. He compares the epistolary fiction, "a fragmented treatment", with the third person narration, which "can divine relationships and comprehend meanings" far beyond the range of the former one. For these readers, Austen's novelistic appeal stems from her departure from the novel in letters, whose "archaic" traditions prevent prose fiction from fully expressing its potential.

While this explanation for Austen's evolution is credible, it obscures a key part of her work by emphasizing praise. Specifically, the emphasis on the obsolescence of the epistolary method oversimplifies the genuine operation of her work(Normandin, 2014). The quantitative fact about *Pride and Prejudice* firstly illustrates it: the number of letters directly quoted or produced increases substantially. Volume I contains five letters, Volume II has four, with the last one, written by Darcy, being the longest in the novel and profoundly alters Elizabeth's understanding, prompting her to exclaim, "Till this moment, I never knew myself". And Volume III features thirteen letters. Although dialogues and third-person narrative remain dominant, it is evident that the novel becomes increasingly epistolary in the final volume, which includes more letters than the previous two volumes combined. This is not a fluke, when a similar distribution occurs in *Mansfield Park*: Volume I provides text from no letters; Volume II, from three; Volume III, from ten. To some extent, it demonstrates that Austen did not see the rising frequency of letters as an artistic negative, and she maintained some distance from the novel's dialogue and third-person narrative. This epistolary resurgence asserts itself toward the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, ratifying the remaining attraction of the letter form to Austen.

3. Functions of Letters in the Novel

To investigate the usage and usefulness of letters in *Pride and Prejudice*, exemplary examples from the following three categories will be explored: revelation of characters, control of emotions and structural effectiveness.

Letters are, in their nature, very personal representations of one's self. Austen, a humorist who depicts the flaws and vagaries of human nature, is more interested in personality than story or

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organization(Butler, 2006). Almost all of her characters unveil themselves via the use of letters, demonstrating aspects that dominate their personalities and allow the reader to form his own opinion of the character. The discussion of the letter-writing style and its correlation with the personality, education and standards of the letter's author can be traced across *Pride and Prejudice*, notably in four letters written by Mr. Collins. Each of his letters boldly displays conceit to both the recipients and the readers. Early in *Pride and Prejudice*, we get the first revealing letter from Mr. Collins to his estranged family. In the letter, he expresses his desire to "heal the breach" that has arisen between his "late honored father" and Mr. Bennet, and his offer of the proverbial "olive branch" precedes the announcement of his intended visit. Such pomposity can be easily observed without any authorial commentary. Rather than feeling embarrassed at his behavior, Mr. Collins believes so strongly in the value conferred upon a person by class that he is snobbish by association and full of self-importance. Each of Mr. Collins' subsequent letters further enforces the reader's original estimation that he is a conceited prig. It is even more noteworthy in his third letter, which in its grossness typifies Mr. Collins' conceit as he superciliously congratulates himself for his narrow escape from a connection with the Bennet family. His letter is a lesson in irony since, even if it were written with solace in mind, the following sentences would be a great cry from its intended meaning: "...your present distress...proceed(s) from a cause which no time can removes" and "the death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this"(Austen, 2017). One would not do Mr. Collin or his creator credit if they did not include his letters, which more succinctly capture his character than reams of description or speech could. Furthermore, Austen's own critical opinion is perceptible: she satirizes conceit and pomposity, and attempts to point out incisively the comic deficiencies and moral weaknesses of her characters(Bender, 1967).

In addition to the immediate effect of the letter, remarks on it by the members of the Bennets allow the reader to analyze these reactions and thereby penetrate the character of each of the Bennets——Mr. Bennet's remarks are characteristically witty and astute, He observes "a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter" and thinks that "this peace-malting gentleman...seems to be a most conscientious and polite young man"(Austen, 2017); Elizabeth is not deceived by this ironic observation. As the most perceptive of the Bennet sisters, she feels "that must be an oddity" and finds "something very pompous in his style"(Austen, 2017). Consistently cheerful and naive, Jane is unable to discern any hidden agendas; Mary feels compelled to demonstrate critical thinking by offering a shrewd assessment of the fashion, and the younger girls are completely uninterested in anything that cannot further their pointless interests; Furthermore, Mrs. Bennet, who is unable to evaluate the letter effectively, is thrilled to receive the alleged overtures of friendship. The usage of this initial letter brings Mr. Collins and each member of the Bennet family into sharper focus. Thus it shows one letter not only exposes the letter-writer's character, but reveals much about other characters in their comments on the letter. Similarly, Darcy's apology letter is not the only character that his letter betrays. Many critics have argued that the complex aspects of Darcy's personality have not been fully depicted(Luo, 2007), yet it is indeed revealed through his letter stemming from the wording and the content of the letter itself(Bray, 2020). It is also fair enough to present it by an omniscient narrator, but its effects and importance would be significantly diminished. When reading the letter, Elizabeth is for the first time forced to face her mistaken and prejudiced opinions, and look at her character, its faults and deficiencies, more closely than she would have preferred. It is important to note Elizabeth's epiphany and self-reflection is brought out by the help of the letter form, consequently achieving a win-win for both the character revelation.

Other letters in Jane Austen's novels are not intended to expose personalities; rather, they express exuberant sentiments. Such letters reflect her closeness to the sentimentality of the epistolary novel, and yet Austen was never a sentimentalist(Sherry, 1979). At strategic points in *Pride and Prejudice*, however, letters are introduced as a natural mode for analysis and

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reflection(Miller, 2003). Examples of this use are Jane's poignant letter to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's short but affecting note to her aunt. Jane, who writes to her sister about her disillusionment of Miss Bingley, shows abnormal discourtesy between her every written line. She begins: "My dearest Lizzy will, I am sure, be incapable of triumphing in her better judgment, at my expense, when I confess myself to have been entirely deceived in Miss Bingley's regard for me."(Austen, 2017) She goes on to describe Miss Bingley's reciprocal visit to her, which neither of them enjoyed. Moreover, she cautiously conveys suspicion of intrigue in relation to Mr. Bingley's diminished feelings for her. But soon she is able to exercise control in such a distraught state. She offers a few paragraphs, as is customary, to pitying Miss Bingley and defending her behavior. Because her actions stem from her care for her brother, Jane forgives her. And she rapidly turns optimistic: "But I will endeavour to banish every painful thought, and think only of what will make me happy."(Austen, 2017) To be given a such letter by one of Austen's heroines is an uncommon occurrence, but to be given one which is written by a heroine in a moment of ecstasy is doubly rare. Elizabeth writes a short but intoxicating note to her aunt, which is written in Darcy's presence after their feelings for each other are confirmed. She praises her for satisfying her interest about Darcy's mediation in Lydia's nasty elopement, and continues eagerly to detail her friendship with Mr. Darcy:

> You supposed more than really existed. But NOW suppose as much as you choose; give a loose to your fancy, indulge your imagination 1n every possible flight which the subject will afford, and unless you believe me actually married, you cannot greatly err ... I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but no one with such justice. I am happier even than Jane; she only smiles, I laugh.(Austen, 2017)

This brief, exuberant note reflects Elizabeth's tremendous emotion, which is unusual mainly in that she expresses her intimate thoughts in a letter. Elizabeth's letter is an excellent illustration of the author's aptitude for making good use of epistolary material. As with the previous personal letters described, it is a combination of components that results in a magnificent creation: the writer's unique phrases, diversity in the storytelling style, and self-revelation of the characters' sentiments.

Letters, in addition to illuminating character and offering a medium for the atypical exhibition of emotions, can be a significant connection in the plot's development. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the letters, whether concerned with elopements, marriage announcements or health issues, act as precursors of serious and significant plot-twists, thus generating anticipation and suspense. Jane's brief but urgent letter, which opens the major action by hastening Elizabeth to Netherfield, and the emotions that follow, are critical to the novel's course. This letter, to be analyzed as a structural device, is essentially a short note:

> My dearest Lizzy,
>
> I find myself very unwell this morning, which I suppose, is to be imputed to my getting wet through yesterday. My kind friends will not hear of my returning home till I am better...(Austen, 2017)

On the one hand, it does allow Jane and Mr. Bingley sufficient time and proximity to fall in love, but does not directly lead to a happy ending, thus inducing speculation and suspense——as to

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how will their story and their relationship develop. On the other hand, the sisters' stay takes credit for the consequences that ensue from it, primarily Darcy's intriguing with and growing interest in Elizabeth. Therefore, despite its briefness and mildness, Jane's message plays a far larger role in the plot of the book. As the ultimate goal of Austen's novels is happy and loving, but simultaneously appropriate and advantageous marriage, inappropriate and scandalous elopements are used for contrast or as obstacles complicating the achievement of that ultimate goal. The two letters relating Lydia's elopement with Mr. Wickham introduces a breaking point of the plot, producing the final rift between the two principal lovers and temporarily destroying the hope of a happy ending. Meanwhile, they provide Darcy with an opportunity of assisting Elizabeth and ultimately winning her over. The limited scope of *Pride and Prejudice* do not allow for the mysterious and dramatic major events typical of the Gothic novels. Nevertheless, it takes events that are often overlooked and undervalued——elopements, marriages, illnesses and presents them as truly life-changing and pivotal to the story(Lodge, 1986).

Letters are also an obvious approach to convey the story since they allow Austen to keep Darcy's rescue of Lydia a secret for a short time, heightening tension. But few will notice the unity and coherence of the plot that the letters function in. To keep the narrative focused on Elizabeth, whose complex consciousness is a trademark of Austen's free indirect language, the work employs a semi-epistolary style——news reaches Elizabeth through letters, allowing the narrator to stay with her, rather than leaving elsewhere to gather the information(Miller, 2003). The plot does not disperse the narrator's attention among several mobile agents such as Mr. Darcy, Mr. Wickham, Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bennet. Far from compromising the free indirect discourse, Austen's use of letters actually facilitates it, keeping the narrator closely aligned with Elizabeth. Additionally, the letters' formal discontinuities remarkably avoids the plot's needless jumps and narrative fragmentation. A similar technique is employed in the third volume of *Mansfield Park*, where more than half of the narrative remains with Fanny at Portsmouth, as letters converge to inform both the protagonist and the reader. By recounting the actions of the predominantly female actors in Lydia's affair, the letters maintain the novel's focus on the predominantly female Bennet household. Elizabeth and the reader are informed about the events involving male characters by female characters like Lydia and Mrs. Gardiner. Although males have a big say in the Lydia affair's conclusion, women ultimately have influence over how it is revealed. In this sense, letters——even those authored by men——unsettle the mask of masculine objectivity, allowing us to see the "feminized" prehistory of Austen's mature work and giving voice to female experience in structure (Normandin, 2014).

"Although the novel itself presents a firm rejection of the epistolary tradition, its turning point hinges on a letter," Lenckos says of *Pride and Prejudice*, citing "an interesting historical idiosyncrasy.(Lenckos, 2005)" As we've seen, however, the novel's opposition to the epistolary tradition is not entirely unqualified. In fact, Darcy's letter is not an exception; it foreshadows the significance of letters in Volume III and initiates a recursive process that Paul De Man claims is essential to literary modernity. De Man considers that literature is the contradictory endeavor to deviate from it in order to escape the traditions that have established what literature is, as seen through the lens of modernity. However, the most self-aware or rigorous literary writings recognize the difficulty of a complete break with the past and conduct a reversal: "After the initial moment of flight away from its own specificity, a moment of return follows that leads literature back to what it is" (De Man, 1983). *Pride and Prejudice* breaks the norms of the literary history it helped shape. While literary history is said to proceed, albeit slowly, beyond the epistolary novel, leaving it in the past, Austen's book, a watershed moment in this history, performs a partial reversal. In them the "continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature"(De Man, 1983).

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4. Conclusion

There is, as these many examples attest, a prominent use of letters within *Pride and Prejudice*. The letters, so prominently and effectively used, have been considered as one substantial reason for the popularity of the novel. This thesis explores the roles that the letters tend to take on, identifying three major advantages that the letters perform. First, the letters are instrumental in assisting the revelations of the characters' true personalities, both overtly through the content of the letter, and covertly through the recipient's reactions. Second, the letters incorporated brief moments when the characters lose their emotional control, though only temporarily and partially. Third, the letters often act as antecedents of important plot twists, thereby generating suspense and uncertainty. And the whole progression of events is arranged in an well-ordered way to permit the female voice heard. Though *Pride and Prejudice* first deviates from the book in letters that dominated eighteenth-century British fiction, it eventually proliferates letters, "folding back upon itself" and signifying at least the desirability of "a firm rejection of the epistolary tradition." This type of return to epistolary tradition is not something Austen discards. It, on the contrary, fuels her fire.

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