"'How much I shall have to tell!'…'And how much I shall have to conceal'": The Interpretation of Speech and Gesture in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

At the end of the British version of the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Keira Knightley's Elizabeth Bennet and Matthew Macfadyen's Mr. Darcy do not kiss.[1] Although this display (or lack thereof) of romantic love is atypical of modern film, it creates a visual equivalence with the proposal scene of Austen's novel, in which Mr. Darcy's exact words are transcribed while Elizabeth only "force[s] herself to speak; and…[gives] him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change…as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances" (263). Like the proposal scene, many conversations in *Pride and Prejudice* are written not as dialogue, but as description of the tone of a character's response or their body language. The manner in which character interactions are described emphasizes the significance of the nonverbal both in the text and in nineteenth century communication conventions, forcing both the characters and the reader into an interpretive dance in which understanding is dependent on a quasi-semiotic "reading" of gesture rather than words; furthermore, the improvement over the course of the novel of Elizabeth's reading of and regard for Mr. Darcy parallels the reader's own journey through the text and emphasizes the intimacy of knowledge that is required to read a person, or a text.

While scholars have examined Austen's free indirect discourse *ad nauseam* and have spent considerable energy discussing expression, conversation, and propriety in her works, little research has attempted to bridge the two subjects. Scholars such as Cohn, Lodge, Pascal, Finch and Bowen, Mezei, and Gunn have claimed that "Jane Austen is generally acknowledged to be the first English novelist to make sustained use of free indirect discourse in the representation of

[1] In the American extended edition of the film, there is an added scene in which they kiss after their wedding, but this is likely to suit the tastes of American audiences, and it is a scene that is not taken from the original text of the novel.

figurative speech and thought" (Gunn 35), and Mary Poovey famously relates Austen's free indirect discourse to what she calls a "nonreferential aesthetic" (251) which allows Austen to ignore the political events of her time. Other scholars, such as Patricia Howell Michaelson, address conversation and speech in a historical context that mentions but does not focus on free indirect discourse; Michaelson states the following about her own work: "The point here…is not *that* Austen was a master of…free indirect discourse…I am concerned here with how the written text helped the reader to learn to speak" (182). Although this comes close to bridging the gap between free indirect discourse (reader-text interaction) and conversational propriety (character-character interaction) in Austen's work, it is still focused on only half of the potential parallel.

Bharat Tandon's *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation* and John Wiltshire's "Elizabeth's Memory and Mr. Darcy's Smile" engage most closely in parallel examination of character-character interaction and reader-text interaction; both consider the manner in which evidence of affection (or lack thereof) between Elizabeth and Darcy is presented to the reader and to the two characters, and they reach similar conclusions despite the different premises of their respective works. Tandon states that Austen is "constitutionally alert to what looks can do, and her novels reflect this in the way they begin to give 'catching the eye'—an activity where physics and metaphysics collude—a more assertive and intentional application than in previous usages" (91). Wiltshire, examining memory rather than communication, connects the reader to the interpretive challenge of *Pride and Prejudice* by saying that "the novel—the real object that one holds in one's hands and whose pages one turns—is…a true, stable, stored record of events always able to be accessed in its pristine form. However…what is accessed still requires its own interpretation" (61).

As a facilitator of interpretation, the narration of *Pride and Prejudice* is necessarily both elucidating and opaque. Austen's free indirect discourse sometimes reveals the thoughts and perceptions of its characters, but it also forces its reader to make the judgment of whether a passage comes from the perception of a character or from the narrator. Passages in which a character speaks directly (i.e., within quotation marks) can perhaps be taken as the most reliable account of what the character is thinking—or so we assume, as quotation marks signal a verbatim transcription. But these quoted speeches are not provided often enough to be a full account of the events that take place in the novel. Furthermore, if we are to assume that the account we read comes (at least some of the time) from a biased narrator, it is possible to maintain a level of skepticism regarding the veracity of even the words in quotations. In a sense, it is this absence of "fact" in the novel which encourages the reader (particularly one who is reading the book or a work by Austen for the first time) to fall into the trap of believing that what the narrative says is reliable. The novel's infamous first line is the bait that encourages the reader to disbelieve Mrs. Bennet's ridiculous voice so that when another narrative voice comes along—one that is far more logical and therefore seems reliable—the reader is bound to believe it.

Although a third person narrator tells the majority of the story, the voice of Elizabeth Bennet frequently enters the text as the logical voice with which readers align themselves. Elizabeth's voice enters the novel slowly and subtly, creeping into the story and becoming particularly noticeable at the beginning of chapter 4, when Jane and Elizabeth discuss the events that have just taken place at the ball. The narrator describes Elizabeth's state of mind as Jane speaks animatedly about the "charming" new neighbors (12): "Elizabeth listened in silence, but was not convinced…With more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister, and with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed

to approve them" (12).[2] This passage puts Elizabeth in the place of a good narrator: she is observant ("quickness of observation"), unbiased ("less pliancy of temper"), and goes unnoticed herself, like a fly on the wall who can witness events without affecting them ("a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself"). Furthermore, at this point in the story, the reader has seen what has taken place at the ball—namely Darcy's obvious spurning of Elizabeth—and has likely already judged events much in the same way Elizabeth judges them here: without much approval. This narrator seems more reliable than one who would claim that a rich man's desire for marriage is "a truth universally acknowledged" (3), and by lulling the reader into this false sense of security, the interpretive process of the reader is conflated with the interpretive process of Elizabeth Bennet.

Progression through the events of *Pride and Prejudice* is not simple for Elizabeth or the reader, for as the free indirect discourse on the page is unreliable to the reader, so is the unspoken meaning exchanged in propriety-governed communication unreliable to the characters. Unlike the more explicit (although never entirely reliable) nature of words, nonverbal signs lack the structured sign-signifier-signified structure that language has—in other words, where a phrase might have two or three potential meanings, one raised eyebrow could mean anything. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the most unreliable expression is a smile—especially one that is not qualified with an adjective to hint at what the smile might mean; according to John Wiltshire, "a 'smile', simply denoted as a smile, might imply a whole range of internal emotions…a smile by itself can be almost unreadable" (56). In chapter 10, the narrator/Elizabeth states that "Mr Darcy smiled; but Elizabeth thought she could perceive that he was rather offended" (37). Later, when Darcy asks Elizabeth about why she is not participating in the dance, a smile is again confounding: "She smiled, but made no answer" (38), leaving Mr. Darcy to ask again "with some surprise at

[2] This and other quotations from *Pride and Prejudice* from the Wordsworth Classics 1994 edition of the text.

her silence" (38). Here, a smile is not an answer, but it does convey meaning that Mr. Darcy cannot grasp, just as Elizabeth cannot always grasp the meanings of Darcy's smiles. To the reader, however, a smile from Elizabeth Bennet—impenetrable to Mr. Darcy—is a breaking of the fourth wall, a sign whose meaning is clear to the reader as a quasi-inside joke as Elizabeth and the reader conspiratorially judge the other characters.[3]

Although the meaning of a smile is neither definite nor easily ascertained, rules of propriety still mandate that Elizabeth "[turn] away to hide a smile" (43) in chapter 11 to avoid offending her conversation-mates. Presumably, no character sees this smile that the readers are privy to, a phenomenon that inspires trust in the narrative voice despite the fact that it should do the opposite: being let in on a secret smile gives the reader more information than the characters have, but it also begs the question of what expressions are being missed by the unreliable narrator. Most things that Elizabeth misses are also missed by the reader; it is only when the narrator dips into another perspective that we might have authority over Elizabeth, as occurs directly after Elizabeth's first unreadable smile in chapter 10 when Darcy's point of view is revealed for a few lines. The shift is easy to miss:

> Elizabeth, having rather expected to affront him, was amazed at his gallantry; but there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody; and Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. (38-9)

This is not Elizabeth's point of view; at this point, she does not know that Darcy is "bewitched" by her and therefore would not and in fact could not make that claim. While it is possible to say that the first clause and even the last could be the words of the narrator, the middle clause of the passage suggests that Elizabeth possessing this "mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner" (38) is the perception of Mr. Darcy.

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[3] In this way, Elizabeth's smiles are analogous to the smiles of Jim Halpert on *The Office*, which are aimed directly at the camera and alert the viewer that the writers are, in fact, being satirical.

If Mr. Darcy reads “sweetness” in Elizabeth, it must come from her expressions and mannerisms; although her “archness”[4] is apparent in her words, it seems to the reader rather strange to describe Elizabeth as being “sweet,” particularly in her conversations with Darcy. The interjection of this new interpretation of Elizabeth’s manner implies that Darcy’s reading of Elizabeth is different from our own, foreshadowing the events to come, but the implication of this narrative shift is easy to miss. John Wiltshire notes that the reader does not see Darcy’s perhaps more accurate reading of Elizabeth because the reader is “seduced, despite carefully judged narrational indices to the contrary, into believing that [Elizabeth’s] smiles are a reliable index of perception and intelligence” (55). Only the most perceptive reader, or perhaps a re-reader who is “deliberately reading against the pull of complicity with Elizabeth (Wiltshire 55), picks up on this moment, because the reader has been persuaded to see things from Elizabeth’s point of view—and Elizabeth does not see Darcy’s thoughts of her, so it is nigh impossible for the reader to “see” it either.

Although this kind of discrepancy between characters’ interpretations of each other (and the reader’s interpretation, as well) is something of a plot device in *Pride and Prejudice*, causing the satisfaction of a relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy to be put off and built up until the novel’s very end, there is a historical explanation for the complex game of expression reading that goes on.[5] While the nuanced reasoning behind a conversational model that accomplishes little in terms of real communication cannot be explained here in its entirety, a passage from

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[4] The Oxford English Dictionary lists the definition of “archness” as “the quality of being arch; cleverness, waggishness; good-humoured slyness, pleasantry” (“archness, n.”). “Archness” and its derivatives (“archly”, “arch”) are used four times throughout *Pride and Prejudice* and only ever in connection with Elizabeth’s expressions.

[5] Of course, I would be remiss if I were to claim that coded language and miscommunication does not still occur today—in fact, I would say most romantic comedies still capitalize on the humor and from the romantic build-up that occur when characters read each other improperly.

John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1808) provides a reasonably complete account of the importance of expression for women in the Regency:

> When a girl ceases to blush, she has lost the most powerful charm of beauty…it [blushing] is the usual companion of innocence. This modesty, which I think so essential in your sex, will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company, especially in a large one.—People of sense and discernment will never mistake such silence for dulness [sic]. One may take a share in conversation without uttering a syllable. The expression in the countenance shows it, and this never escapes an observing eye. (31-3)

Many other pedagogical works detailing conversational propriety encourage similar standards for women, but Patricia Howell Michaelson provides a nuanced account of the work of Scottish naturalist William Smellie to emphasize the fact that conversational propriety was also something with which men in the Regency had to contend. Michaelson summarizes the theory: for Smellie,

> women's language use neither expresses nor communicates rational thought. Rather, it serves an interactive function independent of denotative meaning…Interestingly, male speech fares little better in Smellie's extreme form of gendered language. For Smellie, true men, rational men, speak little; talkative men are not males at all, but monsters. (27)

Indeed, silence is certainly a feature of conversation for both the women and men of *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy is frequently silent, and his silence is frequently misinterpreted, arguably even by himself. In Chapter 12, Darcy resolves not to speak to Elizabeth for the remainder of her time at Netherfield, his perspective slipping into the narrative: "He wisely resolved to be particularly careful that no sign of admiration should *now* escape him…steady to his purpose, he scarcely spoke ten words to her through the whole of Saturday" (45). Elizabeth seems not to notice any sign of affection or silence one way or the other and "[takes] leave of the whole party in the liveliest spirits" (45); in fact, the only reason the reader observes Darcy's silence is because of his acknowledgment of it.

At the Netherfield Ball, Darcy's silence becomes a characteristic which Elizabeth uses to reinforce her existing beliefs about Darcy:

> They stood for some time without speaking a word; and as she began to imagine that their silence was to last through the two dances, and at first was resolved not to break it; till suddenly fancying that it would be the greater punishment to her partner to oblige him to talk, she made some slight observation on the dance. He replied, and was again silent. (67)

At this point, Darcy's silence seems hostile, so Elizabeth retaliates by forcing him to speak; in this scene, silence can be a weapon just as spoken words can. But Elizabeth has misinterpreted Darcy's silence: he is not using it as a weapon, but in a sense as a shield—something that is not revealed until Chapter 31. When Colonel Fitzwilliam states that Darcy's inability to "recommend himself to strangers" (128) comes from a disinterested superiority, Darcy confesses, "I certainly have not the talent which some people possess…of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation" (128). Darcy at least claims that his silence results from an embarrassing shortcoming (and not, presumably, the pride that is attributed to him), and Elizabeth allows him this defense when she makes the analogy between Darcy's conversational inability to her unpracticed piano playing. Darcy responds with a smile (for once an un-enigmatic one) followed by a compliment. It is apparent to the reader, if not to Elizabeth, that Darcy likes her.

Nevertheless, the problem of how to communicate this admiration remains. During Darcy's first proposal, his words utterly fail him, and Elizabeth's heretofore inaccurate reading of Darcy results in her rejecting him; the reader, likely still on Elizabeth's side considering the fact that Darcy's proposal speech is filled with roundabout insults, continues to inaccurately read Darcy as well. This creates a rather paradoxical cycle wherein both words and gestures are unreliable because they can be misconstrued, and the only solution to the problem is a true

intimacy that allows partners to read each other "correctly." Elizabeth hints at this when she speaks to Mr. Wickham about Mr. Darcy, saying first that "Mr Darcy improves on acquaintance" (170). Wickham believes that she means that Mr. Darcy improves "in essentials" (171)—that is, his personality becomes more amiable and civil. Elizabeth then refutes the "reformed rake" concept that Wickham describes: "In essentials, I believe, he is very much what he ever was…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*" (171, emphasis mine). Wickham, who lacks the intimacy with Darcy that is necessary to understand him (and indeed has reason to "wilfully [*sic*]…misunderstand" [*PP* 44] Darcy because of their history), believes that Darcy simply manages to "assume even the *appearance* of what is right" (171), as if Darcy changes his gestural surface phenomena in order to convey a false meaning. In fact, the opposite is true: Darcy changes nothing, and it is Elizabeth (and the reader) whose knowledge of Darcy has grown so that she essentially "speaks his language." Barbara Hardy aptly describes the manner in which the evolution of Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship is viewed by the characters and by the reader: "*We see* the intimacy of anger and reproach rising into that of affection. But the movement is slow and complex, forming part of the whole chronicle of feeling which shows the passions at play both in solitude and in public" (55). Darcy's surface phenomena have not changed, but Elizabeth, because of her slow-burning psychological intimacy with Darcy, is better equipped to understand the meaning and intention behind Darcy's conventionally rude behavior.

Still, Elizabeth's reading skills are not infallible when it comes to Mr. Darcy. When Lydia runs off with Wickham and Elizabeth begins crying in front of Darcy and the Gardiners, free indirect discourse provides an account of Elizabeth's understanding of Darcy's response:

> Darcy made no answer. He seemed scarcely to hear her, and was walking up and down the room in earnest meditation; his brow contracted, his air gloomy.

> Elizabeth soon observed, and instantly understood it. Her power was sinking; everything *must* sink under such a proof of family weakness…the belief of his self-conquest brought nothing to her bosom…it was, on the contrary, exactly calculated to make her understand her own wishes; and never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be in vain. (199)

If we take Elizabeth's belief in her instant understanding to mean that she (believes that she) understands that Darcy will now never love her, then we see that Elizabeth's reading of the situation is, in fact, incorrect—although the first-time reader, still in league with Elizabeth, may not see that. But Elizabeth's instant understanding can be read not as a reference to Darcy, but as a reference to her own feelings—that she "could have loved him" (199). Elizabeth consistently misreads Darcy because until this point, she has, in fact, been misreading herself. Proper self-reading (or self-awareness) is pivotal to the skill of properly reading others, and only once Elizabeth has stopped misunderstanding herself (perhaps even "wilfully [*sic*]" [44], as Darcy accuses in chapter 11) can she fully come to understand Mr. Darcy. Like the reader reframing Darcy's behavior from the beginning, or like a re-reader coming back to a text that has already been read, Elizabeth's understanding of Darcy evolves so that she may accept his final proposal.

Furthermore, Elizabeth has come to understand why reading another person is so important and so intimate, and it is during her confrontation with Lady Catherine that this problem explicitly comes to light. The conversation proceeds as follows:

> [Lady Catherine] 'Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this. I am almost the nearest relation he [Darcy] has in the world, and am entitled to know all his dearest concerns.'
>
> [Elizabeth] 'But you are not entitled to know *mine*, nor will such behavior as this, ever induce me to be explicit.' (255)

Patricia Howell Michaelson contends that "[i]f we think of *Pride and Prejudice* as a kind of conversation manual, with Elizabeth as the character whose personation matters most, the true climax of the novel is [this] splendid confrontation…this scene, like many others, demonstrates

the complexity of linguistic competence, especially for women" (210-1). While Lady Catherine rightly sees familial relation to be that which determines who is entitled to knowledge of one's "dearest concerns," and also uses authoritative language skills to try to demonstrate this, Elizabeth understands that to some degree, one is entitled to intimate knowledge if one can gain that knowledge without the explicit communication strategies that Lady Catherine and Elizabeth must use to communicate with each other. Elizabeth need not be explicit with Darcy; they can read each other's gestures with ease, and this intimacy is demonstrative of a successful reading by both Elizabeth and the reader.

The culmination of good reading is, naturally, love and marriage. Elizabeth and Darcy, having developed their reading skills (of both themselves and of each other), are finally on the same page.[6] When Elizabeth finally asks Darcy when he fell in love with her, he responds with a phrase that sums up the communication challenge that pervades the book: "I was in the middle before I knew that I *had* begun" (272). Like the reader of *Pride and Prejudice*, who is dropped into the scene almost *in medias res*, Darcy—and Elizabeth—only comes to understand what has gone on after learning to read properly. And although Darcy cannot explicitly answer Elizabeth's question, she still understands his meaning, responding, "In spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just…There—I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it [your love]" (273).

Communication between characters and between the reader and the text is often puzzling and never quite as reliable as it could be in *Pride and Prejudice*, but this indirect communication, with all its faults and equivocations, is perhaps the most engaging technique Austen uses to make simple subject matter (the unusual courtship of Elizabeth and Darcy) seem riveting even to modern readers. The lack of reliable information in the text encourages the reader and the

[6] Pun intended.

characters to misunderstand so that the resolution is that much more satisfying, and the importance of intimacy that encourages proper reading becomes apparent to both characters and readers alike.

Although it is true that consistent inconsistency of gesture can seem irrational and frustrating, it is also what make *Pride and Prejudice* a successful text. Just as a Regency ball might have been "much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day" (42), as Caroline Bingley asserts in chapter 10, the conflict of *Pride and Prejudice* might have resolved itself quicker had Elizabeth and Darcy spoken frankly to each other. Nevertheless, without miscommunication and willful misunderstanding, there would be no story. Likewise, as Mr. Bingley says, a ball where guests spoke through words rather than the intimacy of dance would be "much more rational…but it would not be near so much like a ball" (42).

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