



Displacement of Power: A Foucauldian Analysis of Sexuality in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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ABSTRACT

*This article explores Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* from a Foucauldian understanding of power and truth. Where Austen's critics tend to take her subject matter at face value and read her novels primarily about courtship and marriage, we argue that in doing so she is saying something very important about the foundation of modern political economy – namely who may be included and who must be kept out or be marginalized in order for its fabric to endure. In fact, the very subject matter allows Austen to make women's right of refusal that is to say "no" into an important form of socio-economic power. Austen's treatment of everyday life shows that she is a cultural critic that ironically scrutinizes cultural norms, revealing them as products of discourse rather than of truth, while also investigating the tools the characters use to substantiate or challenge these conventions. In this way, she tries to imagine new techniques of resistance to social norms by privileging some characters over others. In Austen's estimation of her characters' decisions and choices of finding happiness, she rejects some uses of power as abusive and esteems others in their ability to resist and follow norms that will bring a sense of happiness to characters. The power of refusal is not only real but is a force when comes up in connection with women's issues and women's rights as well. The metaphorical encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy is a violation of the assumption that women should flatter men in their quest to find husbands. This exchange does not have to do with the right of refusal directly, but is a more subtle and indirect approach to gender and power dynamics.*

INTRODUCTION

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be

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in want of a wife” is the very first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* (hereafter PP) placed rightly as a discourse (Austen, 1813, p.5). Apparently, it seems to uphold the social tradition that a woman’s chief goal is to marry and marry well. Such surface reading is troubling sceptical readers in general and feminist scholars in particular mainly because marriage per se shall not be the author’s sole business. Doing so depreciates her stature as one of the great English literary figures whose works generate discourses of their own. The popularity of PP as a simple love story to literary world lies in its ability to generate complex discourses, new interpretations and not the other way around.

In writing about marriages only, Austen seems to brand herself as a writer with knowledge of sexual relations with the objective, however ironic, of indicating the truth of the sexual struggle (Armstrong, 1987). The “universal truth” offers her a counter-discursive ground that questions the validity of truth as socially constituted. From the opening pages of the novel, Austen intentionally points the ways in which the “truth universally acknowledged” is nothing but a patriarchal myth devised to mask the mechanisms by which it works. In the novel, patriarchy seems to have been incorporated into the voice of whole community. Patriarchal power is diffused through men and women alike in the voice of the community as seen in different approval and disapproval. The community as a unit supports, transmits, and regulates discourses that characters do not accept as such.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to find:

- Displacement of power in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen through Foucauldian theory

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant body of literature is available on Austen. Its bulk is prodigious enough to resist further addition. While a substantial criticism embodies Austen as apolitical and conservative, armed with newest theories, however, fresh scholarship offers a shift in the traditional tendency to read Austen’s world as small, self-enclosed, apolitical, and, in these terms, non- radical and non-subversive. The attempt to apply Michel Foucault to Austen is certainly innovative, therefore, only a few latest studies relevant to the discussions are cited to familiarize it. Nancy Armstrong must be credited for her celebrated work *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987). Although her work is not specifically about Austen, it is redemptive in so far revealing the ordeals of early women novelists. While censuring Ian Watt for eluding historical explanation and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar for not providing an exact account of the women novelists, Armstrong contends, “...when Austen and the Brontes sat down to write novels...they had to distinguish their work from other novels by asserting that they were telling the truth where others had written mere fiction” (p.38). Armstrong argues that Austen’s “marriages...make statements that are at once perfectly personal and perfectly political” (1987, p.192).

Critics take special interest in the artistic strategies she employs to criticize and disrupt power

without upsetting or incurring retaliations. Other critics perceive Austen's rebellious disguise in her subtle irony and humor. Margaret Kirkham, for example, reveals that, "Jane Austen learned to tell the truth through a meddling irony which 'dull elves' might misread, but which she hoped readers of sense and ingenuity would not" (1983, p.162). Keeping in view Kirkham, one may wonder if Austen's statement of ivory tower too was ironic. It seems that the so-called limited field shows neither a narrow political understanding nor consent to patriarchy but a way to question rather than endorse. Similarly, Julia P. Brown and Claudia Johnson argue that Austen's PP legitimizes a constant yearning for pleasure and a conservative longing for authority (1979, p.73). In PP, Austen attains a new model of sexuality through the female gaze, which positions Elizabeth in the role of sexual subject, and Darcy is casted as a desired object. Kaplan is of the view that Austen belongs to two cultures: the patriarchal society in which she lives, and a feminine culture within it. She discovers that the idea of polite domesticity defined the female within that system and society (1998, p.19).

The complete dynamics of Austen's novels can best be understood when they are read as the generation of taste for a new discourse—a discourse that engineers a shift from female passivity to activity and from object to subject position. They are about picturing the possibilities of this metamorphosis. In her novels, she interrogates through marriage plots and love themes issues concerning women treated as muted community. She investigates the validity of marriage and desire critically and cleverly.

The arguments show the significance Austen attaches to power- relationships. Though the review shows Austen manipulating the traditional concept of marriage, none of the scholars explicitly states the force behind such manipulation, which requires a fresh insight.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is guided by Foucault's understanding of truth and power. This understanding echoes both post-structuralism and post modernism in the sense that they defy the existence of any single, universal truth. There is no truth but are truths that question the supremacy of the one that claims itself to be so as Foucault clarifies:

Each society has its regime of truth, its general "politics of truth": that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded values in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Rainbow, 1984, p.131)

Foucauldian power is the product of discourse, which in turn, shares a common terrain with knowledge. The accumulative effect of the three engenders truth that has the validity of "fact". This truth is taken for granted by those coming under the influence of the dominant discourse. However, a discourse in Foucault is always in threat from competing discourses. Foucault aptly states "[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (1978, p.101) There are tools and techniques that ensure dominance as well as subversion. This study critiques power's production

of truth as a way of maintaining the sway of patriarchal power. Power's mechanism in the present context is marriage myth for containing women. Conscious of the marriage myth, Austen through her heroine Elizabeth Bennet, questions its legacy in a forthright manner. Elizabeth in her metaphorical sexual encounters not only questions the myth of marriage but also checks the discourse that produces it. In a Foucauldian sense, then, these interactions provide site for changing power relations in a seemingly apolitical discourse.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Power's production of truth (Blanchet et al.) is shown through the stories of the Bennet sisters, Charlotte, and other female characters. Elizabeth has learned from her parents' experience with marriage and courtship to identify Collins and Darcy as proud, self-centered objectifiers of women. Mrs. Bennet, the mother, while embodying the truth created by patriarchal power, tries to marry off any of her daughters and blinds them in turn to the social and sexual limitations of women both married and single. In Elizabeth's effective steering of social conventions to proclaim her own individuality within the limited sphere, the novel offers an understanding into the social truth produced by patriarchy and its success in veiling it under the guise of romantic courtship.

While to the postmodern readers this may be understandable, it is still significant to investigate how Austen portrays patriarchy's ability to camouflage its mechanisms through marital rituals, and to establish how the novel locates the production of knowledge and pleasure, the two vital components of power relations in Foucault's analysis. Aristocratic Darcy, his rude sister Catherine de Bourgh, and the Bennets assume an idea of power that Foucault calls juridico-discursive power. Juridico-discursive power is mainly negative, or power used to prohibit actions or to say no (1978, p. 83-5). This power "only has the force of the negative on its side, a power to say no; [it is] in no condition to produce, capable only of posting limits" (1978, p.85). Each of the above characters along with Collins exercise power primarily based upon an ability to say 'no' or prevent action. However, repressive power is not the only kind of power exercised in the novel: there is a different power with positive, generative workings as well. Foucault, while noticing this type of power evolving around the eighteenth century, says, "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse".(1980, p. 119)

One of the pleasures that this power in general produces is courtship, romance, and marriage. Since Foucault argues in *History* (1978), and Claudia Johnson points in her study of *Emma*, one of the points of power for men was controlling female sexuality through marriage. In Johnson's analysis of *Emma's* love of power, she highlights the male privilege of coordinating, overseeing, and approving marriages (1990, p.126). Likewise, the Bennets monitor and control the sexuality of their children, as becomes evident in their discussion at the start of the first chapter. Upon hearing the settlement of a man in the neighborhood, Mr. Bennet at once inquires, "Is he married or single?" (Austen, p.3) Mrs. Bennet informs him that he is single and that "I am thinking of his marrying one of them" (p.5). This makes their daughters' sexuality an issue even before they know of it. Mr. Bennet would rather offer the newcomer to, "marrying whichever he chuses [sic] of the girls" (p.6). While Mrs. Bennet has no idea as to what will happen, she at least feels that

her husband is controlling the sexuality of their daughters. He is not the only one dictating Elizabeth's sexuality: as said above, within a patriarchal set up, the whole community helps to observe and monitor female sexuality. One dimension of this policing can be seen through the discourse of how to secure a good marriage. This makes patriarchy unchallenged, as women derive pleasure from socially approved sexual rituals. Foucault believes: "Power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms" (1978, p.86). Patriarchy engenders a means by which it controls political and economic rights and conceals its control over female sexuality. This concealment is enacted through the marriage myth.

As stated, the positive and productive nature of the marriage myth can be seen in the assumed pleasure Mrs. Bennet experiences as a wealthy new stranger comes to reside in the neighborhood. The courtship truth for her is that her daughters are to marry a wealthy man; their lives will be incomplete without that. Charlotte Lucas, anticipating that the myth is true and that she will have a happy life after getting rich husband, thinks her marriage will give her power over her sexuality. It is only after Charlotte's marriage with Collins that Elizabeth expresses displeasure and the readers, if not Charlotte herself, identify the truth obscured by the myth. She feels detached from her husband and the indifference does not bother either of two. Elizabeth finds that ... "when Mr. Collins said anything of which his wife might reasonably be ashamed....Charlotte wisely did not hear" (Austen, p.117). However, if one looks at Charlotte's personality, one finds the rationale behind such marriage. She contends, "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance....and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life" (Austen, p.16). Elizabeth's rejection of Collins upsets the socially established "truth" of courtship. Indeed, the only warning Mrs. Bennet gives to Elizabeth is that "if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all" (Austen, p.91). Yet again, Mrs. Bennet's admonishing shows the extent to which "truth" is not produced by men alone, but is equally done so by women and the community at large. Mr. Bennet, well aware of the "truth" of courtship and the determined composure of his daughter tries to convince her that marrying man of choice is in her best interest. Mrs. Bennet, as patriarchal surrogate, tries to get Elizabeth to comply. She persuades her, and like Collins, still hopes time will change her mind. Mrs. Bennet and Collins both are amazed at the resistance of a girl who is poor and under-classed.

However, in holding firm, Elizabeth counters patriarchal power with her strong individual power. Due to the economic and legal system in England, Collins feels authoritative as a wealthy male heir to direct the Bennets' lives. While as a woman, Elizabeth is powerless to get any economic or legal rights to counter him. One gets amazed at the bold assertions and sheer power of speech at time when she has to be cautious and complicit: "I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal" (Austen, p.82). In rejecting this proposal, she rejects everything that is held valued by Charlotte Lucas. These valuable includes the social and economic security associated with marriage.

Austen relates Elizabeth's refusal of Collins to a rejection of the marriage truth created by patriarchy. In Elizabeth's resoluteness to turn down his offer is the acceptable form of resistance to male domination—both Collins' desire to domesticate and Bennets' attempts to control.

Elizabeth knows well that to cross sexual taboos is to face dire consequences, and she seems to know that there is no more freedom in dictated marriage. What is less evident is the ways in which the same power apparatuses also produce “truths” that give women a momentary sense of pleasure and power. Austen nevertheless tries to correct the notion that the truth lies beneath the body and resides instead in language, behavior and desire. This form of power is sure to displace an earlier desire that characterized aristocratic body and was contingent on that body’s power to dominate the people. Knowing the truth of discourses require linguistic competence used as a power, hence discursive power.

Jane Austen’s competence of language has been acknowledged by critics and researchers alike. It is through language alone that she asserts herself in a male-dominated Romantic period and uses writing as tool to upset the powers that were there. It was a time when, as Armstrong says “. . . fiction actively sought to disentangle the language of sexual relations from the language of politics and, in so doing, to introduce a new form of political power” (1987, p.1). A writer like Jane Austen is conscious of the power of language because matters of domestic nature and sexual relationship alone can be expressed in subversive terms. In fact, language serves as an alternate form of power to traditional power of class, rank, and status. Austen has before her male writers dealing in part with the marriage themes in a language that suited their gender. To Armstrong, “Austen’s fiction plays out the Richardsonian thematics in which a female discourse struggles with that of the male for the power to represent individual identity” (1987, p.146).

This (linguistic) analysis aims to investigate like the author, the potential strength and power of her characters, especially the main one in different situations in the novel. The purpose of this investigation is to answer the question of how the readers consider the power of language so exercised. For instance, in PP, what makes it possible for a middle-class Elizabeth to undermine the judgment of an influential and aristocratic Darcy? Should the readers see her radical in subverting the social order or upholding one complicit within it? It implies whether Austen approves of her characters’ rise to power in a Foucauldian manner by using the tools and systems of power, or, proves in Marxist fashion, the extent to which they occupying a class with power begin to turn more patriarchal than patriarchy itself. Does it mean that getting power or belonging to such a class, really subverts great power and the social order, or, is simply solidifying it? Does Austen try to resist the language of politics through language of sexuality and thus establish a new discourse? To demonstrate the implication of these concerns it is necessary to analyze the linguistic encounters of the two main characters, Elizabeth and Darcy. The two have a very tricky exchange at Netherfield. In order to contain Darcy, Elizabeth and Caroline decide to laugh at him so as to bring him under the panoptic power of laugh. Elizabeth wonders at Bingley’s response strangely as “Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at!” (Austen, p. 47). As a form of discipline, individuals do position it against one another. Foucault gives attention to these micro-techniques of power as: “. . .power in its exercise goes much further [than the State apparatus], passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power” (1980, p.72).

In Foucault’s system of power, more specifically disciplinary power, laughter is a source of power for the powerless. The disempowered has certainly got an edge in laughing at the powerful. Elizabeth abhors the idea of losing the capacity to laugh. She expresses her desire to

laugh as, “I dearly love a laugh” (Austen, p.47). Not only does she laugh and compensate its lack, she challenges him linguistically as well. Darcy recognizes laughing as tool of resistance directed against the powerful in saying, “The wisest and the best of men--may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke” (p.47). This declaration implies that Darcy is the best, wisest and by implication the most powerful man and Elizabeth is of the class of jokers and ridiculous. However, armed with linguistic power, she rightly hits the point, “but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good” (47). Verbal irony has been used at its best in this encounter between characters embodying pride and prejudice. This irony has certainly complicated an otherwise simple marriage theme. Her seemingly private sphere bristles with political meaning. To Claudia Johnson, both Elizabeth and Darcy are renovated through the agency of frank and comprehensive debate as Austen foresees a form of obscurantism capable of approving and legitimizing subversive demands and politics. This indicates the importance of language especially the language of Elizabeth being somewhat underprivileged. By the end of the novel, Darcy claims that he is “properly humbled” by none other than Elizabeth (Austen, p.359). Elizabeth attacks Darcy once again in declaring: “I am perfectly convinced...that Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise” (Austen, p.47). This irony targets Darcy in perfect but harsh manner. Remaining within the fold of politeness, Elizabeth reminds him that not only is he full of blemishes but vainly does he hide these as well.

Elizabeth’s language is very meaningful as it completely undermines Darcy’s discourse. She is repeating and displacing his language. She is speaking male discourse only to undermine it like the rest of the feminists. She repeats that Darcy is flawless but at the same time charges him as flawed and faulty. She is simply ‘in’ to the point of being ‘out’ of his “regime of truth” in a Foucauldian sense. Echoing Foucault, Elizabeth’s ironic discourse subverts the ‘regime of truth’ upheld by Darcy. He has to reconsider the ‘mechanism’ and ‘techniques’ in the ‘acquisition of truth.’ He has to change his total vocabulary in order to negotiate with a person not mindful of his ‘regime of truth’. Darcy must abandon an economy of language that can easily be undermined. Instead of considering himself flawless, he must admit his flaws. In response to her ironic discourse, Darcy must alter his claims to objectivity and absolute superiority. Realizing her potentials, Darcy descends down his lofty discourse and declares “No...I have made no such pretensions. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding” (Austen, p.48). It seems he is implicitly exposing that he has other pretensions as well. While a while ago he objectivizes himself in a generalized manner, here he uses personal pronoun ‘I’ for the first time. He comes down to personal and individual terms much like Elizabeth’s in usage like “I hope I am not one of them” (49).

There is an evident change in Darcy’s tone and demeanor. He continues to admit his guilt and pretensions. Elizabeth notices the change and responds in yet another ironic stroke. Recognizing Darcy’s tone, Elizabeth responds, “But you have chosen your faults well ---I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me” (48). Elizabeth is not but ironic in saying he is indeed exempted from ridicule. His faults are too grave to be disciplined by laughing at, as if only minor follies can be rectified through jokes. Similarly, she ironically reciprocates his personal pronoun in a similar tone in pointing, “And your defect is a propensity to hate everybody” (48). Darcy responds smilingly as, ““And yours’, is willfully to misunderstand them”” (48). His discourse is unproductive against her ironic disposition. Darcy achieves a certain level of community and

equality by coming to the language of Elizabeth. Austen seems to give Elizabeth the power of language, of gaze, of ridicule to undermine Darcy's pretensions to superiority. Elizabeth affects Darcy's words in favor of community rather than control and detachment. Elizabeth attains a level of authority by having her 'regime of truth'. Recognizing this aspect of Austen, Armstrong admits "We must see Austen's novels striving to empower a new class of people—not powerful people, but normal people—whose ability to interpret human behavior qualifies them to regulate the conduct of daily life and reproduce their form of individuality in and through writing" (1987, p. 144). Language in its different sense serves as power disrupting traditional signs of rank and status, and Austen does manipulate it as a genius. The fixed meanings (moments) are still in a very strong position to be shaken, for the supported references do but neutralize the moments further. The critical stage for the fixation can occur only when it is attacked from the peripheries—from the field of discursivity. That becomes even harder but the only possible way for replacement of meanings.

CONCLUSION

Literature not only reflects reality but creates and exposes it as well, as Foucault says; "fiction functions in truth" (Power/Knowledge 193). Austen's fictions just do not reflect but comment and critique too. Hers is a powerful voice in the face of the dominant discourses, be patriarchal or otherwise. Thus, Austen's PP has been placed within this framework. The heroine does not accept marriage a purely male-prerogative with discourses that seem to legitimize the truth of the marriage myth. She exposes it and renders it fragile thus bringing it nearer to a personal understanding of truth and power. This definitely has greater significance for women in general. The power of refusal is more relevant today as seen in people's but more specifically in women's refusal to vaccinate against corona virus. This refusal is seen in issues like abortion to carry a fetus, especially a fetus that is the result of rape or other unwanted sexual desire. Denying the right of refusal is exercising control—which is why there are these protests against different mandates and patriarchal and official actions to control women's bodies.

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