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Is Jane Austen "A Slip of a Girl"?
Jane Austen and the Contrarian, H.W. Garrod
(An abridged version)

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Jane Austen has been in vogue for some time. Critics have always been interested in Austen, but recently she has become something of a "saleable" commodity as well. She was also popular in the 1920s to 1930s, when the two Oxford scholars, R.W. Chapman and H.W. Garrod argued very dramatically about the author. The ensuing contentions between the Janeite and anti-Janeite factions that this debate generated caused a chasm reminiscent of conversations between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, creating an effect similar to *le plaisir de texte*. Due to space limitations, I will focus here mainly on Garrod's arguments.

In this paper I will be examining the main points in Garrod's anti-Janeite critique to determine just how closely his style in "Jane Austen: Depreciation" (hereafter, "Depreciation") resembles the initial section of Austen's text, *Pride and Prejudice*.

"We cannot live without *Pride and Prejudice*"?

According to the British newspaper, the *Mirror* (1 March 2007), in a survey commemorating the tenth anniversary of World Book Day, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was top of the list as "the book the nation cannot live without."

Perhaps because of the numbers of people who "can't live without" *Pride and Prejudice*, there have been innumerable works based on Austen's fiction in the academic world, as well as movies, television dramas, and even the first film biography, called *Becoming Jane* (Director: Julian Jarrold, with Anne Hathaway as Jane Austen and James McAvoy as Tom Lefroy; 2007) which is a totally fictitious Harlequin romance based on *Becoming Jane Austen: A Life* by Jon Spence, in which he emphasizes the effect of Austen's first brief romance with Tom Lefroy.

Henry James, who ushered in another era of Austen mania, criticized the "distinctively mechanical and overdone reactions," especially the "body of publishers" that was commercializing Austen into a "saleable" item (65). That was in 1905. What would James say now, just a little more than one-hundred years later, when Austen has become a perennial sales item?

"Malice" in Garrod's "Depreciation"

To borrow Garrod's phrase, there was also "a somewhat notable boom in Miss Austen" in the 1920s-1930s. Garrod was reacting not against the boom of commercialization of "Austen," but to her popularity, by a process he himself calls "depreciation" of Austen.

"There is a time to be born and a time to die, and a time to be middle-aged and read Miss Austen." These are the beginning lines of Garrod's essay, in which he associates Austen with middle age in a shrewd juxtaposition of age and Austen. In his essay, Garrod professes to being a contrarian, which is unmistakable even in the title: "Depreciation." He begins the essay with the forcible merging of middle age—a time of mental and physical infirmity—that inevitable twilight in one's life, and the offender of his sensibilities, Austen. "Depreciation" is based on a lecture Garrod gave at the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom on May 23, 1928. According to the notes he appended later to the paper, he formulated his presentation in an offhand manner for an informal occasion. Though he proclaims his innocence, his malice can be detected throughout the paper:

> It is not that [a doctoral thesis]; nor yet is it all malice. The malice is (if I may say so) the best part of it but the other parts convey matter which I cannot but think valuable, when there are so many persons to whom speaking lightly about Miss Austen is as bad as "speaking against the Prayer Book." (21)

If there were "so many persons" who worshipped Austen as they would "the Prayer Book," as Garrod implies, perhaps there was some validity in Garrod's statement.

On the other hand, Garrod's intense antipathy can also be interpreted ironically as his very own tale of "Pride and Prejudice." His pride permeates the piece. His own attitude is clear from the fact that he begins his essay with a rejection of the notion of a "great woman"(22). Austen was actually "universally acknowledged" to all (but to Garrod and a few others, perhaps) as a "great woman," while Garrod himself viciously belittles what he calls her lack of literary knowledge and education(29).

Garrod's "prejudice" is palpable. It is this "malice" on Garrod's part that has been the target of criticism since "Depreciation" was published. Apart from the question of whether his malice is, as he himself states, the "best part"(21) of "Depreciation," it is obvious that his malice is intentional, even if constituting merely a "part" of his paper. The "pride" and "prejudice" he uses in "Depreciation," as well as his malice, comprises the essence of *Pride and Prejudice* itself.

"A young woman of wit and spirit —as hard as nails"

Elizabeth is hard as nails, has "wit and spirit" and is "an accomplished flirt"(27).—this is, Chapman's conjecture as to why Garrod admires only Elizabeth. And a detailed analysis of the "hard as nails" personality of Elizabeth reveals the same attribute in common with Mr. Bennet and Garrod as well. Let's look in more detail at how Elizabeth came to be "hard as nails" to begin with.[i]

Pride and Prejudice could be called a *Bildungsroman* in the sense that it is the story of a protagonist's self-disillusionment and spiritual growth, but the distress and despair caused by the young Elizabeth's earnestness toward life may have been perhaps far offset by something even she herself does not recognize. Though not quite self-deception, her response reflects an intrinsic defense against reality that overrides her own self-awareness. The means for response anticipate her own consciousness. The innate genius for sharp language that distinguishes Elizabeth whenever she encounters crises in life serves as a weapon.

This weapon isn't merely defensive, but is at times quite effective for assault as well, though contributing greatly to the protagonist's charm. Elizabeth's acerbic linguistic posturing takes in the universe with irony and humour, not only lending itself to acute discernment of the events around her but also even to reversals. The impression of vitality and energy that Elizabeth exudes is inherent in this rather demonstrative use of language.

Austen's "two inches of ivory" (*Letters* 469) can at any moment be transformed into "an elephant's tusk" (Ghent 100). This small chip of ivory has the latent capacity for becoming an "elephant's tusk" whenever necessary, and consists mainly of this kind of linguistic posturing.

"Beneficent Effect of a Phrase"

What is well to keep in mind is that the sharp-tongued nature of Elizabeth at times echoes that of another character, Mr. Bennet. Irony often comes into play through exchanged glances between the protagonist and her father. The acute powers of observation and cleverness of rhetoric indicate that this second daughter of the Bennet family, with her unique character, has inherited her father's genes.

The value of Mr. Bennet lies mainly in his being a conspirator in irony with Elizabeth. As a father he is simply an eccentric, irresponsible bystander who puts his own interests first. Infrequently, however, he plays the fatherly role to the hilt. Here I will give one example: the expulsion of Collins. He admirably repulses the marriage proposal of the plebeian Collins to save Elizabeth from marital catastrophe (111-12).

If we follow Northrop Frye's formula for comedy, ("the mythos of spring" 163-66) the role of the strong father who obstructs the protagonist is here unilaterally entrusted to Mrs. Bennet, while Mr. Bennet frees the youth from the fetters of convention. It is a moving scene, and Mr. Bennet's rhetoric is dramatically successful. But the more aloof Mr. Bennet is, the further away he finds his gaze from where it should be, and the more difficult it is to recover. Even when his beloved daughter is in danger, Mr. Bennet can't help blurting out such snide commentary. The reader notices over time his rather perverse obstinacy in taking every opportunity to demonstrate his quick wit, whether appropriate or not. In fact, his daughter's impending doom provides a perfect venue for displaying his causticity.

It seems there are other characters besides Barthes's friend, X, who benefit from *effet bienfaisant d'une phrase* (the beneficent effect of a phrase). Barthes explains:

> X tells me that one day he decided "to exonerate his life from his unhappy loves," and that this phrase seemed so splendid to him that it almost managed to compensate for the failures which had provoked it; he then determined (and determined me) to take more advantage of this *reservoir of irony* in all (aesthetic) language. (*Barthes* 147)

Saddled in life with a foolish wife, Mr.

Bennet possibly compensates for his misfortune by on occasion enjoying the "beneficent effect of a phrase." His realization of his ability and his successes seem to whet his appetite for yet more displays of such banter. Mr. Bennet causes many a reversal for other Austen caricatures through clever turns of phrase, a process that in turn creates new caricatures even of himself. Ultimately, the protagonist, Elizabeth, evinces a youthful vitality that supersedes her father's middle-aged tactic of surviving by overcoming the setbacks of life with the self-proclaimed credo, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn? " (364), or to borrow Darcy's phrase: "a person whose first object in life is a joke" (57). Though ultimately they branch off, the similarity of the model that both Elizabeth and her father adopt is clear. By focusing on the sharp rhetoric of Mr. Bennet as a middle-aged man, we begin to notice that other middle-aged man, Austen's severest critic, H.W. Garrod, has himself come to resemble the very characters whose author he so despises. Remarkably, both Mr. Bennet and Garrod come to share the common quality of the "beneficent effect of a phrase."

Garrod's Rhetoric

What Garrod writes about Austen is generally all negative criticism (or perhaps diatribe might be more accurate). Looking at the consistency he displays, it seems that Garrod is still safely outside the sphere of "senility" he so deplores. Yet that consistency also results in Garrod himself repeating subconsciously certain aspects of Austen, such as her technique of using later statements by Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet to overturn earlier ones. This results in Garrod's criticism knowing no bounds, as is evident in the following:

> I am happy with none save Elizabeth Bennet. I daresay there is a land of promise in which we may one day meet such young women as Fanny Price, Anne Elliot, Elinor Dashwood; but it will be a land flowing with milk and water. (37)

As stated above, Garrod gives credit to Elizabeth only as a protagonist. Chapman, however, dismisses Garrod's statement, cutting it down with one deft stroke by stating that Garrod summarily censures as unrealistic any character he does not personally like (29-30). This certainly is true. Nevertheless, it is also true that we, on the other hand, feel like *reading* Garrod's rhetoric. Garrod's parody of Austen's fictional promised land is so acerbic that he depreciates the proverbial "milk and honey" into merely milk and water, implying that Austen's characters cannot live except in such an utterly insipid and banal land. The relocation to this trite, worn "heavenly residence" of Austen's characters seems apropos (at least to Garrod), perhaps thus achieving his purpose.

Garrod's famous line from his essay on Austen also seems a great boon that he has derived from his dislike of Austen, a boon to which he almost appears grateful. And oddly enough, his opening paragraph somehow resembles that of *Pride and Prejudice*. Let's compare the two.

Advent of middle age:
Garrod's introduction

> There is a time to be born and a time to die, and a time to be middle-aged and read Miss Austen. Some men are born middle-aged, some achieve middle age of their proper preference, others have it thrust upon them. Ever so many years ago I became middle-aged all of a sudden. It is idle now, when already I have to answer the graver charge of senility, to protest that I accepted middle age (*and* Miss Austen) very reluctantly. (21)

In "Depreciation," Garrod begins his introduction with the pithy phrase from Ecclesiastes 3:2, "there is a time to be born, and a time to die." To the list of items mentioned in Ecclesiastes he adds his own: "a time to be middle aged." Surely, Garrod inserts this rather frivolous addition because of the impact of that benchmark on his own life. His expression of "middle age" is in sharp contrast, for example, to that of Dante quoted by Barthes—"*Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita* . . ." (*Rustle* 284)—the middle of our life, that conjures up the majesty of the gift of life. It is true that both of them experienced "middle age." Garrod may have sensed, rather than having known intellectually, that he was in "the last compartment" (*Rustle* 285), that is, "*la dernière case*"("*Longtemps*," *Oeuvres* 3.834) of life, as so aptly put by Barthes.

So far all I can safely say is that there is a great disparity between the middle age referred to in Garrod's "Depreciation" and Dante's "middle of life." In Garrod's "Depreciation," the range between living and dying becomes suddenly focused on his insertion of the rather indecorous, caricatural, grievous point in life called "middle age." The reader barely has time to digest this concept before being confronted with an association with "Austen." As mentioned above, Garrod is unaccustomed to using the adjective "great" to describe "woman," implying that Austen is insignificant. The sonorous style of Garrod's introduction, beginning with the phrase from Ecclesiastes, is deflated by the sudden insertion of "middle age," which is then reduced irrecoverably by the further addition of *a trifle*, "Austen," an entity of no consequence. Isn't this anticlimax reminiscent of something else? It is the very anticlimax in which trifling vulgar worldly wisdom disarms Austen's "truth."

Of course, the scale is not as great, but the same divisive wedge is evident in Garrod's introduction, with its similar anticlimax, as what we see in that of *Pride and Prejudice*. If we look at the latter from the perspective of the former, we see a certain conflation. Though faint, there is a hint of Garrod's "middle age" to be detected in Austen's text.

Penetration of "middle age":
Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*

Even if we cannot state categorically that Mr. Bennet's posturing forms the structure of *Pride and Prejudice*, as we can see from the language of both Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth, it is at least certain that they permeate the warp and woof of the textual world of the novel. The form of the posturing of this middle-aged man in a sense even tends toward the style already apparent in the introduction of *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. However little known the feelings or views of such a man maybe on his first entering a neighborhood, 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)

It is significant that the two sentences above are not just the viewpoint expressed in *Pride and Prejudice*, but constitute a literary thread throughout all of Austen's works. These sentences, which resonate as aphorisms, are followed by a conversation. The conversation is, however, not between the youthful companions Elizabeth and Darcy, but between the middle-aged Mr. and Mrs. Bennet themselves. Both of them are the dispensable supporting characters. And the conversation is directed by that middle-aged man, Mr. Bennet.

Certainly *Pride and Prejudice* can be seen as a Cinderella story, but it also contains many elements of the *Bildungsroman*. From this perspective, the bulk of Austen's oeuvre, as Chapman points out, concern young people, with middle-aged characters being mere comic relief (33). Or as Trilling has suggested, it is also possible to view Mr. Bennet as a second-, or even third-rate man and a "moral nonentity" (206, 215). The *raison d'etre* for Elizabeth's cowardly onlooker father, however, actually lies in his role as "thief." Mr. Bennet is a thief in the sense that he "steals" the language.

> When no known language is available to you, you must determine to steal a language—as men used to steal a loaf of bread. (All those—legion—who are outside Power are obliged to steal language.) (Barthes, *Barthes* 167)

He is appropriate as an Austen creation in that he uses secretive or even miscreant behavior to set his adversary off balance verbally. Just as he is causing a reversal for his opponent, he himself begins to come into his own as a character (Soya, "Rhetoric" 238). Elizabeth's aforementioned "evil intent" (if it exists), is another label for this action. Mr. Bennet is the most pervasive language thief in the work; he jousts with his wife, the character with a certain *authority*. Her, not strength, but rather *frail*, and as Mrs. Bennet herself proclaims, "poor nerves" sufficiently qualify her as a *tyrant*.

The conversation between middle-aged husband and wife that develops after the introduction is the truth underlying the aphorisms and maxims in the introduction, reflecting the actual situation. Let's return to the first sentence to see how it also relates to the middle-aged couple.

Of course it should be apparent by now that the sentence that starts with "It is a truth" is the best model of anticlimax. The phrase, "universally acknowledged" that makes "a truth" even more conspicuous is highly suspicious, caused as it is by exaggeration. If we were to borrow Harald Weinrich's expression, it is the epitome of the "*ironie signal*" (61), a rhetorical signal of untruth. This boldfaced lie, by breaking convention, stops being a lie. Through the scathing criticism latent in the alignment with sham in regards to conventional wisdom, the *ironie signal* becomes a method in itself that transcends mere imitation (Soya, *Research* 175-79). This *ironie signal* is Austen's trademark method, having already been used to great effect from her earlier literary attempts to the conclusion of her juvenile, *Lady Susan* (Soya, "*Lady Susan*" 6).

The connotation is conflated with the anticlimax in the introduction of *Pride and Prejudice* evidenced in the inner world of the middle-aged Bennets. That is, through Mr. Bennet's witty verbalization and recognition of his wife's lack of self-awareness and self-consciousness, the semantic nuances behind Mrs. Bennet's discourse are reversed. The mechanism of Mr. Bennet's machinations is nearly equivalent to that of the aphorisms in the introduction of *Pride and Prejudice*. If we view Mr. Bennet from this perspective and take into account the merging of his natural disposition toward artlessness with his poignant awareness, we can see that this anticlimax is indeed rooted in middle age. It is deeply rooted in soil that allows the novel to end as far more than simply the Cinderella story of the match between two young protagonists.

After looking at how middle age permeates *Pride and Prejudice* and returning to Garrod's re-reading of the text, we can make some new discoveries. Before delving into this subject, however, first I would like to discuss another similarity between Austen and Garrod: humour.

It is quite conceivable that Garrod was greatly inspired by Austen's humour. Perhaps what prompted Garrod to write his "perverse," "Depreciation" was not his revulsion of Austen, but rather the blood in his humour that was piqued by the author, and his desire to express it. I say this because first, we can see the joy he takes in hating Austen. This in itself is accompanied by humour. What is most important, however, is that through this process Garrod suddenly becomes one with Elizabeth, who herself knows that to hate people is to enjoy them. To confirm Elizabeth's *strategies*, we have only to remember "the enjoyment of all her original dislike" (35) Elizabeth regains when she notices the Bingley sisters' hypocrisy and coldheartedness. Both Austen and Garrod are remarkably synchronous in their scathing rhetoric and in their stance towards the characters.

The negative emotion of hate can obviously be transformed into a positive feeling of pleasure, but this process requires a certain intellectual distance and manipulation. The golden aphorism, "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel" (31 December 1769), which Horace Walpole was fond of articulating, comes to mind. This is probably what Garrod and Elizabeth have in common.

Garrod's natural gift of hate becomes a good stimulus for "Depreciation," providing an excellent opportunity for whetting his knife-like wit. This is exactly what Elizabeth herself proclaims (226). And it is also true about Garrod that "one cannot be always laughing at a man [or, a "*great* woman"] without now and then stumbling on something witty."

The superimposition of Garrod and Elizabeth extends to that other middle-aged man, Mr. Bennet, who shares the blood of the protagonist and serves as the foil to Elizabeth's wit.

Garrod's "Last Word"

"Born Middle-Aged" vs. "*Ironie signal*"

When he reaches the last line, even Garrod finally mollifies his poison pen. He naturally tries to summarize his assertions here, dealing the fatal blow to his adversary, attempting to silence her by reducing her to "a slip of a girl," reminiscent of the rationale in Barthes's "the last word."

> . . . every language combat . . . seeks to gain possession of this position; by the last word. . . . it is the last throw of the dice which counts . . . the victory goes to the player who captures that little creature whose possession assures omnipotence: the last word. (Barthes, *Discourse* 208)

And Garrod's " last word" is as follows:

> And yet she has a doctrine of the soul; and it is what I hate most about her. Perhaps it is salutary that it should sometimes be put to us coolly that the true grandeur of the soul is its good sense. But I do not want it put to me by a slip of a girl. (40)

Garrod is unconcerned with appearances in his forthright disgust with Austen, displaying an animality that resembles that of Mark Twain. As Trilling points out, Mark Twain's comments do indeed sound "feral" (209).

> I often want to criticize Jane Austen, but her books madden me so that I can't conceal my frenzy from the reader; and therefore I have to stop every time I begin. Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone! (Twain 642)

When *Mark Twain's Letters* were published in 1917, the last sentence was deleted. It wasn't until three years later that Brander Matthews published Twain's whole comment. It may be that Garrod's and Twain's abhorrence of Austen was rooted in a fear that resembles male panic. Though firmly grounded in the male principle, they fear control by the female psyche of the world portrayed in Austen's works, as Trilling explains in his *The Opposing Self* (209). It isn't known, of course, if Garrod shared Twain's feelings to the extent of wanting to dig up Miss Austen.

I will forgo their critical feral repugnance here and proceed to the expression, a "slip of a girl." Though Garrod claims that Austen was merely a "slip of a girl," if this were actually true, she probably would not be so stimulating to him.

I am reminded here of Carol Shields's inference on the satirist Jane Austen. Shields indicates that Austen first became conversant in the art of satire while still in her early teens, and mentions her first readers (her listening public) had a lot of influence on her works to foster her a satirist(29). At the same time, perhaps Austen truly was a *born* satirist. As Virginia Woolf conjectures, fairies might just have taken her right out of the cradle at birth to see the world from the heavens (136), creating by default a natural satirist. If Woolf's scenario of Jane's birth has any validity, Woolf's speculations (or more strictly speaking, powers of observation) recall another of Austen's inherent traits, that of being "born middle-aged."

"Born middle aged" is originally a poignant phrase thought to have been coined during the Garrod-Chapman debates. By using this phrase in "Depreciation," Garrod tacitly ridicules Austen's avid admirers, who are far too young to be of the age of "surrender." Garrod probably wished to have the title, "born middle aged," conferred on Chapman, the very person. Austen is a "born satirist," and it is highly probable that she was also "born middle aged." In the case of Austen, of course, I use the phrase not as ridicule, as does Garrod, but because Austen is simply born middle aged; the author is young and has an innocence and insouciance. And still, she has a power of observation (or perhaps because of Woolf's fairy whimsy) that truly comprehends what it means to be middle aged as well, regardless of her actual age.

John Bayley reads some feelings into Garrod's "Depreciation." Bayley's interpretation can be summarized as follows: in re-reading Austen's works we discover something about our own outlook on life. Bayley uses Garrod as a case in point.

> She [Austen] bothered Professor Garrod: she got under his skin: in re-reading her he discovered something about his own outlook on life that made it urgently necessary to depreciate hers. And this is typical. Our reaction to her seems intimately, even alarmingly, dependent on our own history. (1)

Did Austen actually get "under his [Garrod's] skin"? Did Garrod, in re-reading Austen, actually "discover something about his own outlook on life"(which sounds ominous), and did the effect drive him to "depreciate hers" ?

If Bayley's observation quoted above is valid, then perhaps the aspect of Austen that shook Garrod's outlook on life was not that Austen was a mere "slip of a girl"—the label he had foisted on Austen—but that she was genuinely "born middle aged."

Conclusion

As we have seen, Garrod and Austen share not only a similar literary style based on acerbic humour, but also breathe the same air, and show the same signs of middle age. If that is the case, being a descendant in variant form of her literary archetype, the Garrod project seems most ungrateful. He is a contrarian. It may sound paradoxical, but it is perhaps just this excessive repulsion that makes him innocent. The *extremity* of his response against Austen resembles greatly Weinrich's "*ironie signal*."

D. H. Lawrence also professes an anti-Janeite view, and is quite open in his indignation. According to Lawrence's own admission, his righteous indignation arises from the sense of the "old maid" Austen having mercilessly destroyed the unity that derived from the continuous "same blood stream" of the great English authors, such as Defoe and Fielding, who were of a better era (58). Using Lawrence's term, "blood connection," however, seems at the very least to be alive and well as an intermediary between Austen and the twilight years of Garrod.

*This essay is a translation of a revised version of a paper I presented at the symposium of the 2nd annual conference of the Jane Austen Society of Japan, held at Konan Women's University, June 28, 2008. The earlier and full-length version of the article, in Japanese, appeared in *Eigo Seinen, The Rising Generation*『英語青年』No.1916-1919 (Kenkyusha, 2008-2009).

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[i] For the relationship between Elizabeth's and Mr. Bennet's protestations and of Elizabeth herself, see my book, *Jane Austen Research* (173-92), where I have provided detailed illustrations of these points, although from a different perspective. In this paper I have kept such examples to a minimum.

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