

Charlotte and Elizabeth: Guardians of the Female Mind in *Pride and Prejudice*

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In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen's depiction of womanhood is both varied and expansive. A woman can be gentle in spirit, incapable of finding ill in others. Daughters can be impossibly "silly" in their romantic endeavors. Wives are sometimes obnoxious, meddling fools with easily disturbed nerves. Even women linked by their intelligence, such as Charlotte and Elizabeth, differ in terms of practicality and adherence to social norms. There is, however, a factor that distinguishes intelligent females in the novel from the unintelligent: their insistence on maintaining privacy from male influence. From a feminist perspective, Jane Austen's emphasis on female personal space implies that intelligent women must secure privacy in order to remain independent, freethinking individuals within a patriarchal society. By linking privacy with mental growth, Austen takes part in a larger network of feminist literature in which private space is equated with female creativity and freedom from domestic duties. Therefore, Austen's examination of privacy serves as a critique of limitations on female intellectual growth.

The issue of female privacy is perhaps most associated with feminist works published long after *Pride and Prejudice*, but Austen's depiction of the matter can be seen as a precursor to these later arguments. Both Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf published works pertaining to the physical and mental privacy needed for women. *A Room of One's Own*, for instance, clearly establishes a link between female creativity and physical privacy. In fact, Woolf directly states that without a private room, a woman cannot effectively engage in the mental task of writing (Woolf 52). Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" presents a similar argument about mental privacy by depicting a protagonist whose mental functioning is handicapped by an abrasive, belittling male character, to the point that she loses sanity. Even as recently as the late twentieth century, feminist authors such as Adrienne Rich have depicted patriarchal beliefs as invasions of the female mind and a means of hampering female creativity (Rich 208). While Austen's subtle linking of privacy with female intellect is not nearly as straightforward as Virginia Woolf's demands for a room of her own, and even though Austen's proposed consequences for a lack of mental privacy pale in comparison to Gilman's depiction of insanity, her view of personal space should not be overlooked, but should be considered part of an early stage in the feminist examination of female privacy.

One way in which intelligent females in *Pride and Prejudice* secure privacy is through the definition of personal space on a physical level. Charlotte exemplifies this sort of female privacy through the arrangement of her home at Kent. After her marriage to the overbearing Mr. Collins, one might expect Charlotte to lose her autonomy, but during Elizabeth's tour of the house, it becomes clear that Charlotte has maintained a degree of independence. For example, Elizabeth admires Charlotte for having selected the least pleasant sitting room for personal use because "Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment had they sat in one equally lively" (Austen 112). In other words, Charlotte has manipulated Mr. Collins into granting her personal space by claiming a room her husband finds unattractive. Elizabeth also remarks that when Mr. Collins could be forgotten, "there really was a great air of comfort throughout" and assumes "he must be often forgotten" (Austen 105). Charlotte's intelligence has allowed her to create a comfortable environment in which she limits Mr. Collins' invasion of her personal space, freeing

her from the droning lectures that so plagued the Bennets during his stay at Longbourne. Charlotte's determination to secure a physical space to call her own echoes future feminist arguments, specifically Virginia Woolf's claim that any woman who wished to write, or in Charlotte's case, to think independently, must have a "room of her own" in which to work (Woolf 52). Therefore, Charlotte's private room can be seen as a move to protect her independence from the danger of Mr. Collins's male influence.

Despite the independence Charlotte maintains by dividing her space from her husband's, her mission to secure physical privacy is only partially effective. As Woolf points out in *A Room of One's Own*, a woman needs a "quiet" or even a "sound-proof" room in order for her physical privacy to result in productive thought (Woolf 52). Furthermore, because the "common sitting room" was often the most private space a woman could obtain, constant disruptions often prevented women from developing creative thought (Woolf 66). In light of these claims, the fact that Charlotte's private space is a sitting room, rather than a library or office, is significant. Sitting rooms generally served a public function. It was in this room that women greeted and served guests. In effect, the room was more public than private. By contrast, the masculine space of the study was intensely private, rarely having more than one chair (Gan 73). In fact, males such as Mr. Bennet are the only characters that attain a fully private intellectual space. Mr. Bennet's library provides him a space in which to function privately, free from the domestic chaos that often infests his home. Charlotte's supposedly "private" space, however, is still vulnerable to intrusion by guests, making her quest to define physical privacy only partially successful.

Like Charlotte, Elizabeth is also only moderately successful in securing physical space away from Mr. Collins. Despite her best efforts to separate from Mr. Collins through a refusal of his marriage proposal, Mr. Collins manages to penetrate nearly every area of Elizabeth's life. Not only is Mr. Collins destined to inherit the private space of Elizabeth's home, but he also invades her physical privacy by overstaying his welcome at Longbourne, even after Elizabeth's refusal makes his presence increasingly uncomfortable. After all, "He was always to have gone on Saturday, and to Saturday he still meant to stay" (Austen 78). In fact, Mr. Collins even returns for a second stay at Longbourne when visiting his future bride Charlotte (Austen 88). By returning to Elizabeth's home despite the discomfort he creates, Mr. Collins invades Elizabeth's private space.

Perhaps even more indicative of Mr. Collins's disregard for Elizabeth's need for physical privacy is his reaction to her refusal of marriage. After Elizabeth clearly rejects the proposal, Mr. Collins states, "it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly wish to accept, when he first applies for her favor; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time," and proceeds to say he will pursue the match anyway (Austen 73). The subtle threat of sexual violence implied by Mr. Collins's inability to accept a woman's "no," adds a new dimension to the idea that Mr. Collins ignores Elizabeth's need for personal space. Rape, while clearly a crime against a woman's physical privacy, is perhaps the most serious violation of a woman's emotional and mental well-being in existence. Therefore, Mr. Collins's allusion to rape, even if unintentional, not only reflects a deep disregard for Elizabeth's right to physical privacy, but also introduces the concept of female privacy on a *mental* level.

The failure of both Charlotte and Elizabeth to secure a defined, physical space of their own points toward the idea that while Austen may view "a room of one's own" as the ideal form of privacy for intelligent females, it is impractical, and perhaps unattainable, quite possibly because the female roles of wife, mother, and hostess, are inherently social. Elizabeth's successful relationship with Darcy, however, models a second, more attainable type of personal space: mental privacy. Unlike Mr. Collins, Mr. Darcy is acutely aware of Elizabeth's need for independence and individuality, even countering Miss Bingley's accusation that Elizabeth's walking to Netherfield showed "an

abominable sort of conceited independence,” with the remark that the incident did not tarnish his opinion of her (Austen 25). His defense of Elizabeth’s independence shows he not only accepts, but admires Elizabeth’s mental daring. Because of this respect for Elizabeth’s intelligence, Mr. Darcy consistently retreats from Elizabeth’s space in order to give her mental privacy.

As Susan C. Greenfield has stated, *Pride and Prejudice* “aligns absence with productive thought,” meaning that when Mr. Darcy grants Elizabeth his absence, he is providing her with an opportunity to develop her own thoughts (Greenfield 337). For example, when Elizabeth receives a troubling letter relating Elizabeth’s elopement, Mr. Darcy states, “I am afraid you have been long desiring my absence, nor have I any thing to plead in excuse of my stay but real, though unavailing, concern” (Austen 180). Mr. Darcy recognizes the situation as mentally and emotionally overwhelming, but in lieu of showering Elizabeth with unsolicited advice, he withdraws from the situation and avoids invading Elizabeth’s mental space. Greenfield also notes that “Elizabeth is confused in Darcy’s presence and thoughtful about him (and much else) in his absence,” specifically noting Elizabeth’s flustered emotions upon confronting Darcy at Pemberly contrasted with the energetic working of her mind when she believes he is not at home (Greenfield 338). By this logic, Mr. Darcy’s physical withdraw from Elizabeth reflects an awareness of Elizabeth’s need to think privately, rather than a need to be physically alone. When Elizabeth Bennet is alone, she experiences a heightened degree of mental privacy by retreating inward. In lieu of focusing on appearances or social rules, Elizabeth withdrawals into the private space of her mind, which results in increasingly complex, self-directed thought.

The concept that mental privacy is essential to the development of the female mind helps explain why Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins but eventually marries Mr. Darcy. When Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins’s offer of marriage, his reaction is to immediately invade her mental space by telling her how she should have responded. His attempt to dictate her beliefs is swiftly countered by Elizabeth’s remark “You must give me leave to judge for myself, and pay me the compliment of believing what I say” (Austen 74). In this situation, Elizabeth is forced to demand mental privacy. She does not simply ask Collins to retreat physically, but asks that he refrain from invading her thoughts as well. Mr. Collins’s social position is particularly detrimental to Elizabeth, because his role as a clergyman is, in a sense, to invade the mental space of others. The very act of preaching, of attempting to shape another’s personal beliefs, can be interpreted as an attack on mental privacy.

Other works examining female mental privacy include oppressive relationships similar to that between Mr. Collins and Elizabeth. For example, in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” John believes his wife’s mind is fragile, and therefore discourages her from engaging in mental activity such as writing (Gilman 3). This dismissal of his wife’s intellectual abilities corresponds with Mr. Collins’ attempts to replace Elizabeth’s beliefs with his own. For example, when Elizabeth rejects his proposal, Mr. Collins refuses to acknowledge her thoughts about the marriage as valid, and simply replies that he “shall hope to receive a more favorable answer” at his next proposal” (Austen 74). By attempting to implant his beliefs in Elizabeth’s mind in place of her own, Mr. Collins commits a serious offense against Elizabeth’s mental privacy. Elizabeth’s refusal to marry Mr. Collins serves as protection from the mental decay experienced by women with little or no mental privacy.

In contrast, Mr. Darcy does little to inhibit Elizabeth’s thoughts, but rather provides her opportunities for intellectual growth. When Elizabeth rejects his first proposal, Mr. Darcy does not attack her beliefs like Mr. Collins, but simply provides a letter of explanation (Austen 129). This method expresses much more respect for Elizabeth’s mental privacy because she is expected to form her own beliefs based on the factual information provided. Greenfield also notes that after “having routinely misunderstood Darcy in his presence,” Elizabeth individually interprets various

pieces of “evidence” including “Darcy’s letter, then his Pemberly estate, and finally her aunt’s second-hand account of his help with Lydia” (Greenfield 344). In other words, it is always through indirect means that Elizabeth obtains further information about Darcy’s character. Because Darcy is absent when these pieces of evidence are presented, Elizabeth is forced to draw her own conclusions about his character, which means her mind is occupied with productive thought. By limiting his direct interference in Elizabeth’s thoughts, Mr. Darcy actually fuels her mental activity. Furthermore, Elizabeth’s mental growth, such as increasing awareness that she may have misjudged Darcy, is what enables her to feel love and affection toward her future husband (Morgan 57). At the beginning of the novel, Darcy and Elizabeth appear ill-matched, but Darcy’s respect for Elizabeth’s intelligence and mental space “offers Elizabeth an understanding of herself, one that is moral and affectionate and sound” (Morgan 68). In short, by distancing himself from Elizabeth’s thoughts, Darcy helps Elizabeth to independently develop beliefs about herself, namely her recognition of her previous prejudices.

Austen’s insistence that lack of mental privacy inhibits original, daring thought patterns is in line with arguments of later female authors who would equate female privacy with creative freedom. In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich states that one of the most effective ways men oppress women is to “cramp their creativeness,” partially defined as “the social and economic disruption of women’s creative aspirations” (Rich 208). In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, Rich’s remarks are highly applicable. Elizabeth has “creative aspirations” in that she wishes to think in nontraditional ways. For example, she would like to shed the belief that marriage is a practical, even economic issue, in favor of equating marriage with happiness (Austen 73). Mr. Collins attempts to “cramp her creativeness” by presenting the decision as a problem to be solved algorithmically based financial and social factors. The concept that male interference in the space of the female mind can lead to a lack of creativity and stunted intellectual growth places *Pride and Prejudice* within a larger, continuing pattern of feminist literature concerning female privacy.

By creating intelligent female characters who strive to preserve physical and mental privacy from men, Austen implies that women must avoid male interference in order to remain independent, creative thinkers. The failure of both Elizabeth and Charlotte to secure a defined physical space away from Mr. Collins suggests that Austen views physical privacy as impractical. However, the mental distance between Elizabeth and Darcy, along with the mental growth that accompanies that distance, presents the view that intellectual privacy is both attainable and effective for independent women. While Austen’s beliefs about female privacy may not be as explicit as those presented by other female authors such as Virginia Woolf, she certainly presents insightful commentary on the subject. To tolerate male dictation of one’s private thoughts is to condemn oneself to a life as “silly” as Lydia’s or Kitty’s, to a marriage as disastrous as Mrs. Bennet’s, or to a future as passive and predictable as Jane’s. While the conditions of Elizabeth’s married life are not explicitly outlined in *Pride and Prejudice*, one can rest assured that her insistence on mental privacy protects her from the misfortunes of her peers.

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