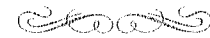


A TRUTH
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33 GREAT WRITERS ON
WHY WE READ JANE AUSTEN



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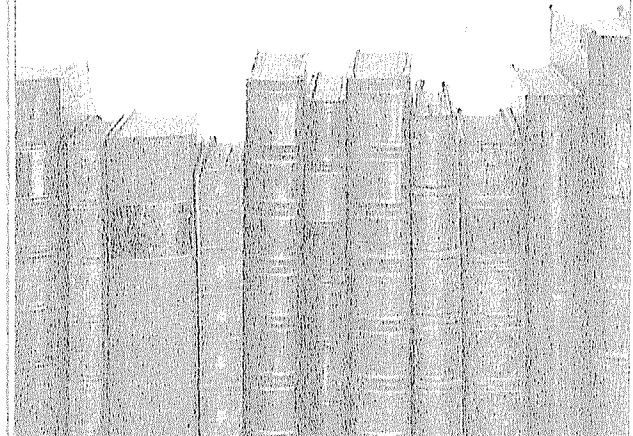
Susannah Carson

FOREWORD BY

Harold Bloom



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Foreword

HAROLD BLOOM

Some literary works are mortal; Jane Austen's are immortal. What makes this so? Austen's work possesses an uncanniness, a certain mode of originality. She created personality, character, and cognition; she brought into being new modes of consciousness. Like Shakespeare, Austen invented us. Because we are Austen's children, we behold and confront our own anguish and our own fantasies in her novels. She seems to explain us for the simple reason that she contributed to our invention: Personality is Austen's greatest originality and the cause of her perpetual pervasiveness.

The precision and accuracy of Austen's representation is Shakespearean. The influence of the heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, Rosalind of *As You Like It* in particular, is palpable upon Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse of the equally superb novel she entitles. After Shakespeare, no writer in the language does so well as Austen in giving us figures, central and peripheral, utterly consistent each in her (or his) own mode of speech and consciousness, and intensely different from each other.

The strong selves of Austen's heroines are wrought with a fine individuality that attests to her reserves of power. Had she not died so soon, she would have been capable of creating a Shakespearean diversity of persons, despite her narrowly, deliberately limited social range of representation. She had learned Shakespeare's most difficult lesson: to manifest sympathy toward all of her characters, even the least admirable, while detaching herself even from her favorite, Emma.

Austen is a profound ironist who employs her irony to refine aspects

Benjamin Nugent



THE NERDS OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

In Chapter 47 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's sister Mary tries to commiserate with her on the public disgrace of their younger sister Lydia. At this point, Lydia has run off with Wickham, who has not yet agreed to marry her. If Wickham doesn't ask for Lydia's hand, Lydia will be ruined for other men, destined to live sequestered from society or to fall into prostitution. Says Mary:

"This is a most unfortunate affair; and will probably be much talked of. But we must stem the tide of malice, and pour into the wounded bosoms of each other, the balm of sisterly consolation."

Then perceiving in Elizabeth no inclination of replying, she added, "Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step involves her in endless ruin—that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful,—and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour toward the undeserving of the other sex."

Elizabeth lifted up her eyes in amazement, but was too much oppressed to make any reply.

Pride and Prejudice is consistently funny and insightful, but this is one of the few scenes in the novel that achieves tragedy. Mary's overtures are just too lame for Elizabeth to acknowledge, even in the Bennet family's bleakest hour. Austen's ear for dialogue is perfect as usual; pouring sis-

terly balm into wounds is exactly the inept metaphor for sharing feelings that Mary Bennet would construct. At the moment when the sisters need each other the most, Elizabeth finds Mary so ridiculous she can't even respond to her offer of sympathy. It's not that Mary's ignorant; she's always retreating to her room to read, the most literate of the Bennet sisters. And yet she can't earn Elizabeth's respect, because Elizabeth, herself so charmingly sneaky in conversation, finds Mary's awkwardness insufferable. In other words, Mary's a nerd, one of the earliest examples of a nerd in a famous work of literature.

Austen dramatizes the contrast between Mary and Elizabeth early on, in Chapter 4. Elizabeth is, in contemporary terms, a cool person. The difference between the two sisters emerges in the way they play piano.

Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached. Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well . . .

In speech as well as music, Mary is studious but clumsy. She can be relied upon to poison a casual conversation with pedantry and formality:

"Pride," observed Mary, who piqued herself upon the solidity of her reflections, "is a very common failing I believe. By all that I have ever read, I am convinced that it is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it, and that there are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary."

She goes on like this, spooning out cant at such length as to suggest she believes it's a great gift to her audience. Elizabeth and Darcy both engage in the same kind of psychological dissections, as when Darcy explains to his friend Bingley that Bingley mentions how quickly he makes decisions in order to appear self-deprecating while actually boasting of his own spontaneity and daring. Elizabeth constantly analyzes Darcy's pride to her deferential older sister Jane. What makes Mary's analysis repellent to Elizabeth is the way it suggests a lack of emotional engagement with its subject. Just as Mary cannot imbue her skillful piano playing with ro-