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***Much Ado and Pride and Prejudice:
Twin Characters and Parallel Plots***

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Much Ado About Nothing and Pride and Prejudice are telling a similar story which centers on Beatrice and Benedick in the first case and Darcy and Elizabeth in the second. The article also argues that Jane Austen had Much Ado in mind while writing Pride and Prejudice, but this second proposition is not readily provable (as such borrowings often are) by direct quotation and comparison. Jane Austen's familiarity with Shakespeare and the similarity of her plot suggest the truth of this second proposition, but more important for this paper are the comparisons between the narratives themselves since they tell important things about the nature of both stories.

In Much Ado, we have two intelligent, articulate people, smarter than anyone else around them, who fight with each other wittily and nearly endlessly. It is a form of courtship, and it is brilliant entertainment. The problem is that we won't be satisfied unless our two favorites come together at the play's conclusion for a happy ending. And yet the dynamic of their relationship takes them further away from what they and we want. How can we possibly have our insult comedy and yet eat our wedding cake too? Darcy and Elizabeth are in a similar fix. The remainder of the paper tracks the mechanisms by which Shakespeare and Austen have maneuvered through nearly impossible difficulties in plot and character construction to a happy result.

King Charles I was not the most brilliant of rulers. Even Winston Churchill, who liked and sympathized with him, said, "None had resisted with more untimely stubbornness the movement of his age."¹ Nevertheless, Charles I famously wrote on his copy of *Much Ado About Nothing* "Beatrice and Benedick," and while he was usually wrong, in this judgment of the true stars of this most spectacular of Shakespeare's wit-combat shows he was triumphantly correct. The editors of the Folger *Much Ado* say, "It is generally agreed that Beatrice and Benedick are the model for the witty lovers in comic drama of later centuries; and it can be argued that they led as well

¹ Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Volume Two: The New World* (London: Cassell & Company, 1974), 216.

to Jane Austen's Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and to Scarlett and Rhett in *Gone with the Wind*.”² While Scarlett and Rhett are beyond the scope of this essay, I will argue that *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Pride and Prejudice* are telling an essentially similar story which centers on Beatrice and Benedick in the first case and Darcy and Elizabeth in the second. There is, of course, much evidence to support Darcy and Elizabeth as the stars of *Pride and Prejudice*. Perhaps one of the clearest examples is a popular one. On Amazon.com, there are two pages of Darcy sequels and retellings—including *Mr. Darcy, Vampire*—and nothing even remotely similar concerning Bingley.³ A secondary point for this essay is that Jane Austen had *Much Ado* in mind while she was writing *Pride and Prejudice*, but this second proposition is not essential to my argument, nor readily provable (as such borrowings often are) by direct quotation and comparison.

Let me begin with the weaker of my two arguments—that Jane Austen was adapting or re-imagining *Much Ado*. As a child, she was greatly influenced by Anne Lefroy, the wife of the rector George Lefroy, “Mrs. Lefroy was an ideal that can be discerned behind the faults and imperfections of all Jane Austen’s heroines.”⁴ Anne Lefroy’s brother Egerton Brydges “wrote that his sister ‘had an exquisite taste for poetry, and could almost repeat the chief of English poets by heart, especially Milton, Pope, Collins, Gray, and the poetical passages of Shakespeare.’”⁵ By 1814 in *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen was writing, “Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman’s constitution.”⁶ In her case, with Shakespeare as part of the furniture of her childhood, it may have seemed to be so.

2 Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, eds. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1995), xvi.

3 http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Mr.+Darcy&x=0&y=0#/ref=sr_pg_1?rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3AMr.+Darcy&keywords=Mr.+Darcy&ie=UTF8&qid=1298420477

4 Jon Spence, *Becoming Jane Austen: The True Love Story that Inspired the Classic Novels* (New York: MJF Books, 2003), 30-31.

5 Spence, 31.

6 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: Richard Bentley, 1882), 54.

In 1949, Elizabeth Jenkins said in her biography of Jane Austen, “When Macaulay mentioned Shakespeare and Jane Austen in the same breath, he did not suppose it necessary to state the obvious differences of their art and scope; admirers of Jane Austen understood what he meant in making the comparison, and feel that however far apart they stand, the two share the quality, in however differing degrees, of creating character.”⁷ More than fifty years later, John Wiltshire, after an extensive and enlightened analysis of Shakespeare’s influence on Austen, reached similar though much broader conclusions, “Jane Austen could treat Shakespeare casually, yet at the same time use quotations from him to specific effect in her novels, because she had in fact assimilated his work in a more thorough and complete way, a way which enabled her to be independent. She may be deeply indebted to Shakespeare, not for phrases and characters, but for the principle of organization of her novels, for her way of conceiving of dramatic conflict, and her capacity, through generating moral and psychological sets of affinities between her characters, to provide a sense of a homogeneous world.”⁸ In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen is also clearly indebted to Shakespeare for the bedrock of her characters. She may indeed have added a Regency wing or two, but the foundations and the original building are Shakespeare’s. In Wiltshire’s words, “Darcy and Elizabeth are playing together in the presence of Shakespeare.”⁹ A direct comparison of the narratives will help to make this clear. Thus, by proving the stronger of my two points—that *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Pride and Prejudice* are telling an essentially similar story—I can also bolster this weaker case. It is, after all, easier to pursue the well-tested mechanisms of comparative literature than it is to read the mind of a long-dead author who has, unfortunately, neglected to leave us letters, notes, or obvious quotations.

In *Much Ado*, we have two intelligent, articulate people, smarter than anyone else around them, who fight with each other

7 Elizabeth Jenkins, *Jane Austen* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1949), 87-88.

8 John Wiltshire, *Recreating Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 75.

9 Wiltshire, 71.

wittily and nearly endlessly. It is a form of courtship, and it is brilliant entertainment. Indeed, except for Hamlet consistently and Prince Hal and Falstaff, occasionally, no one else in Shakespeare has comparable dialogue. We love these two sparring lovers and wait for the next wit combat with higher and higher expectations that Shakespeare consistently meets and then persistently exceeds. The problem is that we will not be satisfied unless our two favorites come together at the play's conclusion for a happy ending. And yet the very nature of their relationship, nearly every word in their immensely clever discourse, takes them further away from what they and we want. How can we possibly have our insult comedy and yet eat our wedding cake too? Darcy and Elizabeth are in a similar fix. One of the first reviewers of the novel said of Elizabeth, "She is in fact the *Beatrice* of the tale; and falls in love on much the same principles of contrariety."¹⁰

It is a nearly impossible task. Shakespeare had tried it before with *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the conclusion of that play is still a matter of lively controversy. There are, in fact, many examples where either the happy ending or some other element of the story must be changed or sacrificed. In Oscar Wilde's 1895 play *An Ideal Husband*, the former lovers Lord Goring and Mrs. Chevelly battle away furiously and wittily, while Mrs. Chevelly tries desperately to engineer a marriage between them. Unfortunately for her plans and perhaps for Goring's future happiness, their bitter insults overwhelm any positive results, and Goring marries the intelligent but far less combative Mabel Chiltern.¹¹ Noel Coward concludes *Private Lives* with Amanda and Elyot sneaking out of the door with their suitcases, leaving their discarded lovers, Victor and Sibyl, behind.¹² Amanda and Elyot have not resolved their differences,

10 Unsigned review in the *Critical Review* published in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage vol.1* edited by B.C. Southam (New York: Routledge, 1995), 44.

11 Oscar Wilde, *Two Plays by Oscar Wilde: An Ideal Husband and A Woman of No Importance* (New York: Signet Classic, 1997).

12 Noel Coward, *Play Parade* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1933), 263.

nor are they likely to do so. Far from being the end of their conflict, the conclusion of the play is nothing more than a signal for another round of angry argument and vociferous lovemaking. In this case, Coward's fiction suggests, there is no resolution, only greater and greater conflagrations.

Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* is another such story. Rex Harrison, who starred in *My Fair Lady*, the musical version of Shaw's play, said, "Relating opposing ideas was something Shaw did brilliantly, but the relationships between men and women—those got him really stuck."¹³ While his judgment is understandable, it is ultimately unfair. Shaw's ambiguous ending, with Eliza declaring she will never come back and Higgins being sure that she will, is arguably the nearest possible approach to a conventional comic conclusion in difficult circumstances.¹⁴ To do otherwise would be to run roughshod over the characters, and when the musical made its way to an authentically happy ending, it was only after Lerner and Loewe humanized or at least harmonized the characters, moving a little closer to the old Broadway conventions, uncovering a love story and even managing to work in a chorus of servants singing "Poor Professor Higgins." Most of all, they were sharpening characters to clarify—and when necessary to create—the appropriate emotions. In other words, they were working very hard to get around the difficulties of the plot Shaw had left them.¹⁵

It is no surprise then that Reuben A. Brower says, "The triumph of *Pride and Prejudice* is a rare one, just because it is so difficult to balance a purely ironic vision with credible presentation of a man and woman undergoing a serious 'change of sentiment'. Shakespeare achieves an uneasy success in *Much Ado About*

13 Rex Harrison, *A Damned Serious Business: My Life in Comedy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 73.

14 Bernard Shaw, *Androcles and the Lion, Overruled, Pygmalion* (New York: Brentano's, 1916), 107-209.

15 Alan Jay Lerner, *My Fair Lady: A Musical Play in Two Acts* (New York: Signet Books, 1956).

Nothing.”¹⁶ So, how does Shakespeare succeed and Jane Austen triumph (or vice versa) in this plot and with these characters that they share?

First, someone must say what the lovers, in fact, feel. In Juliet McMaster’s words, “We see in Elizabeth as in Beatrice the subsumed attraction that is behind their antagonism—although they always fight with their men, they are always thinking of them.”¹⁷ In Act II, Scene i, for example, Beatrice begins speaking (about Don John) at line 3. She has dragged Benedick’s name into her conversation by line 7.¹⁸ In other words, it took her approximately eleven seconds. Shakespeare’s method of having someone else say what the lovers feel is, not surprisingly, more spectacular and theatrical. The scenes to fool Benedick and Beatrice into falling in love with each other, which Don Pedro stages, are both effective and funny. Both of Don Pedro’s victims announce a change of heart or at least a new willingness to express and act on the feelings that were already in their hearts. Jane Austen’s version has, among other things, Miss Bingley maliciously teasing Darcy about his admiration of Elizabeth and asking, “When am I to wish you joy?”¹⁹ Elizabeth’s journey to understanding how she feels about Darcy is considerably longer, in part because the novel is told from her point of view, and all suspense would be lost if she made up her mind too early.

Still, it is the nature of these warring lovers to struggle even against their deepest desires. And it is hard for them to get past the notion that a quick quip is better than a halting truth. As Benedick

16 Reuben A. Brower, “Light and Bright and Sparkling: Irony and Fiction in *Pride and Prejudice*” published in *Casebook Series. Jane Austen: Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park* edited by B. C. Southam (London: MacMillan Publishers LTD, 1985), 185.

17 Juliet McMaster, “Love and Pedagogy: Austen’s Beatrice and Benedick” published in *Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice* edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 43.

18 All references to *Much Ado* are from *The Arden Shakespeare: Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (New York: Methuen, 1981).

19 All references to *Pride and Prejudice* are from *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen: Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27.

tells Beatrice, “Thou and I are too wise to woo peacably.”²⁰ Somehow a more serious element must be introduced into these extremely sprightly comedies, and the lovers must have a chance to work (or at least speak) together in sadness and seriousness of purpose. Therefore, each story gives us a second pair of lovers, more traditional in some ways, less experienced, and certainly less articulate. Plus, each story binds the secondary lovers to the primary ones in bonds of family and friendship. Hero is Beatrice’s first cousin and best friend; Jane is Elizabeth’s favorite sister. Claudio is Benedick’s best friend, just as Bingley is Darcy’s.

The secondary love stories will plunge their lovers into pain and grief, as love stories tend to do halfway through comedies in any event, but these secondary lovers are specially built to break down. Hero and Jane are beautiful but silent—at least with the men they love. And Claudio and Bingley are nearly incapable of expressing themselves and practically incapacitated by self-doubts. Here is J. R. Mulryne’s judgment on Claudio, “He is easy prey for Don John because of a deeply-ingrained mistrust of his own feelings; he cannot exclude the possibility of his being quite wrong even about his most intimate beliefs.”²¹ Darcy says essentially the same thing about Bingley, “Bingley is most unaffectedly modest. His diffidence had prevented his depending on his own judgment in so anxious a case, but his reliance on mine, made every thing easy.”²² So, the secondary love affairs collapse. The pain of these friends and relatives acts as dampening rods for the atomic chain reaction of the primary lovers’ wit. In other words, they are forced to be serious and can therefore move toward marriage.

In the case of Darcy and Elizabeth, the process is slowed by the fact that Darcy is (as his words above suggest) the main cause of that collapse. As a result, *Pride and Prejudice* must have another

20 Shakespeare, V.ii.67.

21 J. R. Mulryne, *Shakespeare: Much Ado About Nothing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), 40.

22 Austen, 371.

failed romance, this one between Elizabeth's sister Lydia and Elizabeth's former suitor Wickham. For this second catastrophe, Elizabeth and Darcy can be on the same side, and once Darcy has fixed everything in both cases, like an aristocratic and very wealthy Cupid (including apologizing to Elizabeth for his interference in Bingley's life and wedding plans), the real ending is at last at hand.

Indeed, the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* is considerably more dilatory than that of *Much Ado*. It is, after all, a novel with 124,949 words, not a play with 24,407. The two romances of Elizabeth's sisters share between them almost all the details in the Claudio and Hero plot, including the possibility of their fathers participating in duels. Leonato makes his challenge clear to Don Pedro and Claudio, whatever his unspoken reservations may be, "My lord, my lord,/ I'll prove it on his body if he dare."²³ In Mrs. Bennet's overwrought words, "And now here's Mr. Bennet gone away, and I know he will fight Wickham, wherever he meets him, and then he will be killed, and what is to become of us all?"²⁴ Also, in these secondary stories we find fathers condemning their daughters. Leonato declares, "Why, doth not every earthly thing/ Cry shame upon her? Could she here deny/ The story that is printed in her blood?"²⁵ Bennet insists he will never again admit Lydia or her new husband to his home, "Mrs. Bennet ... let us come to a right understanding. Into *one* house in this neighborhood, they shall never have admittance. I will not encourage the impudence of either, by receiving them at Longbourn."²⁶

Also because there are two secondary courtships in *Pride and Prejudice*, the reprehensible side of Claudio's character can be paralleled, not by the passively and consistently virtuous Bingley but by the ever-wicked Wickham. Claudio asks Don Pedro, "Hath Leonato any son, my lord?" And Don Pedro, who understands the

23 Shakespeare, V.i. 73-74.

24 Austen, 287.

25 Shakespeare, IV.i. 120-121.

26 Austen, 310.

point of the question, replies, “No child but Hero, she’s his only heir.”²⁷ Claudio then proceeds with what will be an arranged marriage to Hero, even though he is not well enough acquainted with her or her family to know whether or not she has siblings. It is Claudio who determines to disgrace her in church without first having a private conversation with her to investigate Don John’s slanders. It is Claudio who says, when he thinks Hero to be recently dead from the shock and shame of his accusation, “What though care killed a cat, thou hast mettle enough in thee to kill care.”²⁸ And it is Claudio who agrees to marry (albeit as a punishment) Hero’s imaginary cousin. Leonato’s description of her is suited to secure Claudio’s consent, “My brother hath a daughter,/ Almost the copy of my child that’s dead,/ And she alone is heir to both of us.”²⁹

Hero suggests an excuse for Claudio even while he is attacking her in church, “Is my lord well that he doth speak so wide?”³⁰ Similarly, even after he unceremoniously drops her for the newly wealthy Miss King, Elizabeth defends Wickham to her Aunt Gardiner, “What is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end, and avarice begin? Last Christmas you were afraid of his marrying me, because it would be imprudent; and now, because he is trying to get a girl with only ten thousand pounds, you want to find out that he is mercenary.” Mrs. Gardiner responds, “But he paid her not the smallest attention, till her grandfather’s death made her mistress of this fortune.”³¹ Elizabeth will soon find that Wickham’s sins amount to more than a willingness to marry for money. Darcy informs her that Wickham had attempted to elope with Georgiana, Darcy’s fifteen-year-old sister, and that “Mr. Wickham’s chief object was unquestionably my sister’s fortune ... but I cannot help supposing

27 Shakespeare, I.i. 274-275.

28 Shakespeare, V.i. 132-133.

29 Shakespeare, V.i. 282-284.

30 Shakespeare, IV.i. 62.

31 Austen, 153.

that the hope of revenging himself on me, was a strong inducement.”³² After Wickham succeeds in running away with Elizabeth’s sister Lydia, Mr. Gardiner, who discovers the wayward couple, reports, “They are not married, nor can I find there was any intention of being so.”³³ Only the liberal application of Darcy’s money brings about a wedding.

Yet however unkind the suitors may be, in both *Much Ado* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the secondary love stories must be successfully concluded before we can reach the primary or true happy endings. This is necessary not only because Beatrice and Elizabeth are expected to worry about the happiness of others before their own, but also because both authors have denied the audience what it wants most until the story finishes—and it is one more distinction between the stars and the supporting players.

Finally, there is a large comic element shared by these narratives—the ridiculous humor of Dogberry and Mr. Collins. They too serve their purpose in the success of a plot structure that nearly always fails. When the secondary lovers plunge these comedies into gloom, there is a danger that the very nature of the narratives will change irretrievably and there will be no way of getting back to an essentially carefree and therefore completely happy ending. Dogberry and Mr. Collins throw their considerable weight onto the comic side of the scale. Who, in the presence of such determined, self-important, and ridiculous folly, can possibly believe that the story will end in tragedy or even tragi-comedy? In addition, the humorous territory the two of them create allows a breathing space for the audience and for some of the characters. It is in Dogberry’s presence, for example, that Claudio and Leonato agree that Claudio will marry Hero’s (imaginary) cousin, and it is in Mr. Collins’ home that Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth. And Mr. Collins certainly and Dogberry possibly provide one more service. They help to demonstrate the scarcity of good marriage partners and to reconcile the audience and the readers to the less than perfect

³² Austen, 202.

³³ Austen, 302.

matches that precede or accompany those of the main characters. Thus, Dogberry says in enumerating his supposed virtues, “I am a wise fellow, and which is more, an officer, and which is more, a householder, and which is more, as pretty a piece of flesh as any in Messina.”³⁴ And when Jane wishes that Elizabeth might find a man to bring her as much happiness as Bingley has brought Jane, Elizabeth teasingly responds, “Perhaps, if I have very good luck, I may meet with another Mr. Collins in time.”³⁵

So, Shakespeare and Jane Austen have given us what we wanted and by almost all the laws of the writing of fiction could never have. Here are two lovers in two stories who will not admit their love, two wits who will not bridle their cleverness, two dominant personalities who cannot be tamed or even temporarily silenced. They are two of the unlikeliest candidates for the happy ending of a peaceful wedding ever put between the covers of a book or onto a stage. We are likely to agree with Leonato’s judgment early in the play, “O Lord, my lord, if they were but a week married, they would talk themselves mad.”³⁶ But things change, and we have Beatrice saying to Benedick, “I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.”³⁷ If that seems too sweet to carry conviction, here are Elizabeth’s words to Darcy, “To be sure, you know no actual good of me—but nobody thinks of *that* when they fall in love.”³⁸ And perhaps that touch of realism is the last piece of the answer as to why these two love stories have worked so well and been enjoyed for so long by so many.

34 Shakespeare, IV. ii.77-79.

35 Austen, 350.

36 Shakespeare, II.i.330-331.

37 Shakespeare, IV.i.285-286.

38 Austen, 380.

Ace G. Pilkington has published over one hundred poems, articles, reviews, and short stories in five countries and more than sixty publications. He is an active member of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and his poetry has appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, America, Poetry Wales, and Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. He is the author of Screening Shakespeare from Richard II to Henry V, Cambridge University Press's Shakespeare and the Moving Image included his essay on Zeffirelli, and with his wife, Olga, he edited Fairy Tales of the Russians and Other Slavs, and wrote the filmography for Michael Flachmann's 2007 Shakespeare from Page to Stage. He is a regular contributor to the Utah Shakespearean Festival's Insights and Midsummer Magazine, and some of his Shakespearean and historical essays are also available online at Bard.org. Ace G. Pilkington is Professor of English and History at Dixie State College and Literary Seminar director at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. He has also lectured widely on literature, history, and politics. Ace's play Our Lady Guenevere was first produced in 1997 in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's New Plays series. He has an M.A. in modern drama from Utah State University; an M.Litt. in English Renaissance drama from Middlebury College in Vermont; and a D.Phil. in Shakespeare, history, and film from Oxford University.

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