Speech, Writing, and Allegory in
Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract
Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* opposes Darcy, a character closely associated with writing, to Wickham, one associated with speech. Elizabeth Bennet’s early prejudice in favor of Wickham and against Darcy—by extension, in favor of speech and against writing—is, among other things, an example of what Jacques Derrida calls phonocentrism. Her prejudice is as much a literary necessity as a moral defect, since Austen has ensnared her in a phonocentric allegory. After the unfolding of Darcy’s letter, the novel complicates the allegory, empowering Elizabeth, who, in her final argument with Lady de Bourgh, triumphantly exploits the fact that speech can function like writing. The novel does not replace phonocentrism with its opposite, a prejudice in favor of writing; rather, it shows how both speech and what we commonly call writing depend upon arche-writing. The novel stages its own retroactive detachment from the media prejudice it exploits.

Keywords
Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, deconstruction, media
Jane Austen’s lively representation of speech has become the topic of recent books (Tandon; Stovel and Gregg). Most impressive among them is Patricia Howell Michaelson’s *Speaking Volumes*, which corrects the tendency of scholars to overemphasize the role silent reading played in the development of the modern novel. Michaelson demonstrates that oral reading was a widespread practice throughout the long eighteenth century, when “reading together functioned both to reinforce domestic relationships and to provide practice in the art of speaking” (18). She claims that *Pride and Prejudice* functioned “as a kind of conversation manual” (190)—especially for women neglected by the elocationists, who usually presupposed an audience of male would-be orators (188-89).\(^1\) This attention to oral reading, which apparently fuses speech and text, promises to overcome an unduly polarized understanding of eighteenth-century literature. But if readers can use *Pride and Prejudice* as a conversation manual, the story it tells seems uninterested in the consolidating possibilities of oral reading. Mr. Bennet withdraws to his study to read alone. At Netherfield, Darcy and Miss Bingley read separate volumes (Austen 60). Mr. Collins can sustain his oral reading of Fordyce’s Sermons for no more than “three pages” (77). The Bennets read personal letters aloud, but this just seems to be an efficient way of sharing their content, and the letters (especially those of Mr. Collins) are unlikely models of conversational excellence. The novel’s most important scene of reading is Elizabeth’s solitary rumination on Darcy’s letter. Though Austen’s audience may profit from communal reading, the novel’s characters do not find it especially attractive.

While it is metaphorically true that “in a literate culture, writing and speech are inseparable” (Michaelson 17), writing presupposes the potential separation of text from speaker. An emphasis on the inseparability of writing and speech risks glossing over the historical tensions between them. Michaelson herself notes that the supposedly “firm establishment of print culture” in the eighteenth century coincided with “the development of the elocution movement, which resisted the growth of print culture, emphasizing the virtues of the spoken word along the lines of ancient tradition” (44). She is rightly uncomfortable with the “either/or nature of the opposition” (17) between speech and writing, but contemporary critics are not the originators of this opposition, which, despite its logical deficiencies, has shaped the history of Western media. The leading modern theorist of this history is Jacques Derrida, whose early work documents the pervasiveness of phonocentrism, the prejudice in favor of speech and against writing. Derridean theory, however, went in

\(^1\) Michaelson prudently admits: “One cannot know that Austen consciously planned for her novel to be a kind of conversation manual” (203).
and out of style and left Austen’s novels nearly unscathed. This critical lacuna is especially striking in the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose first two volumes, narrating the opposition of Wickham and Darcy, expose the seductive errors of phonocentrism. One critic notes in passing that Elizabeth Bennet’s “conversations with Wickham lead her away from knowledge, not toward it, and deeper and deeper into trouble. . . . The power of the voice, in Austen’s world, must be disciplined by and tested against the power of writing, embodied in books and letters and assembled personal testimonies” (Simpson 81-82). Yet the novel does more than discipline wayward talk. While most Austen scholars luxuriate in moral judgment (a response her fiction certainly invites), the prejudice of *Pride and Prejudice* is native to language, arising—at least, in part—from asymmetries in our ways of producing language. Language materializes itself in one medium or another (speech, recorded speech, print, manuscript, PDF file, or what have you). We may be tempted to assuage our anxiety about language in general by concentrating that anxiety onto a particular medium. Phonocentrism displaces a general anxiety about the inadequacies of language onto writing, whose demotion redeems speech. Media prejudice could take other forms—even a prejudice against speech and in favor of writing (graphocentrism).

Austen, so different from Derrida in most respects, shares with him a resistance to media prejudice, and Derrida is a useful guide to the codependence of speech and writing in her fiction. Rather than scorning or idealizing particular media, Austen discloses how various media derive from what Derrida calls a generalized writing, an arche-writing. Rather than simply reverse the value judgments of phonocentrism (that is, claiming that writing is good and speech bad), Austen’s novel reinscribes writing into speech, manifesting how speech has always been a kind of writing. If so, why have Austen scholars avoided taking advantage of Derrida? Style is no doubt a major impediment. Derrida’s convoluted prose differs greatly from Austen’s sleek prose; their styles make radically different demands on readers. The stylistic gap, however,

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2 Critics have noted how rarely studies of Austen refer to deconstruction (Dutoit 81; Miller, *Jane Austen* 107-8). Grant I. Holly’s “Emmagrammatology,” despite its Derridean title, offers a Lacanian analysis of *Emma*; Holly’s remarks on how *Emma* “relentlessly makes character a mere function of language” (46-47) mesh with the concerns of the present essay.

3 People have often assumed that Derrida’s work entails a preference for writing over speech. But he emphasized that the challenge grammatology poses to the phonocentric tradition “will not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not befall an innocent language” (*Of Grammatology* 37; emphasis in original). In interviews, he took pains to make it clear that he was not pro-writing and anti-speech: “What interests me is writing in the voice, the voice as differential vibration, that is, as trace” (*Points* 140). Austen’s characters are not innocent of “writing in the voice.”
between Derrida and Austen should increase our admiration for the latter, whose graceful narratives bestow many of the insights that Derrida arrives at belatedly and laboriously.\footnote{According to the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, 1972 is the date of the first occurrence of “phonocentrism” in English (“phonocentrism, n.”), but Western history from Plato onward teems with evidence of the prejudice to which this noun refers. Though Austen would not (and could not) use such rebarbative terms as “phonocentrism” and “arche-writing,” my avoidance of these terms would necessitate ambiguous circumlocutions—a stylistic failure of a different kind. The earliest use of the word “medium” to signify “a means or channel of communication or expression” long antedates Austen’s work (“medium, n. and adj.”).} Austen was a thinker as well as a storyteller, and storytelling was her chief means of thinking. \textit{Pride and Prejudice} is an allegorical reflection on media, and it goes beyond the empiricist protocols of eighteenth-century British fiction and philosophy.

Derrida characterizes phonocentrism as “the historico-metaphysical reduction of writing to the rank of an instrument enslaved to a full and originally spoken language” (\textit{Of Grammatology} 29). Writing is the enslaved instrument, speech the autonomous master. Speech, which usually dies on the air leaving no audible trace, can seem to be a pure projection of meaning—unlike written marks, whose visual persistence is more likely to betray the gap between signifier and signified. Though speech is no less external than writing (sound waves radiate outward), the externality of speech effaces itself, permitting the delusion that it is an unmediated unfolding of the speaker’s interior (\textit{Speech and Phenomena} 77); “In speech, thought thus presents itself as the reassuring face of unfailing unity, preserved from all distance from itself, from all difference between its substance and the signs that it animates” (Moati 31). According to Derrida’s well-known historical synopsis, phonocentrism dominates Western thought and establishes a hierarchy in which “good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one” (\textit{Dissemination} 149). Among Austen’s contemporaries, perhaps the most resolute spokesman of phonocentrism was the actor and elocutionist Thomas Sheridan, who offers the following appraisal of speech and writing: “we may plainly perceive the vast superiority which the former must have over the latter, in the main end aimed at by both, that of communicating all that passes in the mind of man; inasmuch as the former works by the whole force of natural, as well as artificial means; the latter, by artificial means only” (n. pag.). He thinks writing should be “an handmaid” of speech. He warns: “The natural consequence, indeed, of neglecting the art of elocution, is that of reducing a living language at best to the state of a dead one. For in just and true elocution alone, consists the life of
language; that which is false or disagreeable, places it below its dead written state, by the uneasiness and disgust which it occasions” (n. pag.). Sheridan supports his phonocentrism with mythology: while writing is “the invention of man,” speech is “the gift of God.”

Though he does not use the word “phonocentrism,” John A. Dussinger, one of the only critics who has focused on the play of media in Austen, claims that the “privileging of living speech over writing (as inert, dead language) is a predominant rhetorical strategy in the whole genre of the early novel and attains a remarkable technical sophistication in the novels of Jane Austen” (4). His analysis of Austen’s phonocentrism is nuanced, and he ends up arguing that “there is a priority of the written over the spoken word in Austen, even though the ideal of letter-writing is ‘to-the-moment,’ in imitation of speech encounters” (147). He finds that “usually in Austen,” books “are suspect, ersatz objects used for ego gratification rather than real sources of knowledge”; thus, the printed book occupies the lowest rank in the media hierarchy, beneath speech and the handwritten letter that, ideally, imitates speech (149). But, in fact, Austen does not clearly privilege letters over books. Though Mr. Collins, for example, flaunts his pomposity by reading from Fordyce, he also disdains novels (Austen 76-77), and his letters (not to mention his speech) provide abundant evidence of pomposity. Austen’s novels include absurd bookish characters like Mary Bennet, but they also include absurd illiterates like Lydia Bennet. Austen dramatizes the capacity of humans to make fools of themselves in any medium. Mr. Knightley, the bookish hero of Emma, and Fanny Price, the studious heroine of Mansfield Park, suggest that a devotion to reading is not in itself egocentric or obnoxious.

Austen’s attitude toward speech and writing is easier to account for if we imagine her disarticulating media hierarchies, rather than simply perpetuating them. She does not idealize the written word, unlike Samuel Richardson, master of the epistolary novel, who writes to Sophia Westcomb that their “correspondence is, indeed, the cement of friendship: it is friendship avowed under hand and seal:

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5 Mansfield Park demonstrates Austen’s familiarity with the elocutionists (Michaelson 128-29).
6 To Dussinger’s credit, he does not present phonocentrism as truth: he claims, on the contrary, that Austen’s privileging of speech over writing is a “trick” and that the speech in her novels is “the final illusion to be conjured up from the printed page” (170).
7 The novel’s disdain for Mary, a relatively innocuous character, is troubling. Perhaps Mary attracts derision not because she speaks in a bookish manner, but because she is so predictable. Elizabeth’s dialogue is not devoid of bookish sentences (256, 336), but she, like Austen, is capable of a variety of registers. Nonetheless, Austen’s radical challenge to media prejudice does not seem to coincide with an equally robust challenge to gender bias: while the novel vindicates a bookish male character (Darcy), it repeatedly degrades a bookish female, who, as many have noticed, bears some resemblance to the author.
friendship upon bond, as I may say: more pure, yet more ardent, and less broken in upon, than personal conversation can be even amongst the most pure, because of the deliberation it allows, from the very preparation to, and action of writing. . . . While I read it, I have you before me in person: I converse with you” (Selected Letters 65). Richardson’s graphocentrism merely inverts the value judgments of phonocentrism: now writing achieves greater purity and ardor than speech; being “less broken in upon,” writing is rich in presence while speech is comparatively poor.

Austen also avoids the bold phonocentrism celebrated by Walter Scott in The Heart of Midlothian. When Reuben tells the protagonist, Jeanie Deans, that he will write to the Duke of Argyle to persuade him to save her sister from the death penalty, Jeanie says: “We must try by all means . . . but writing winna do it—a letter canna look, and pray, and beg, and beseech, as the human voice can do to the human heart. A letter’s like the music that the ladies have for their spinets—naething but black scores. . . . It’s word of mouth maun do it, or naething, Reuben” (267; emphasis in original). Scott’s novel presents face-to-face speech between the sovereign and the anti-epistolary girl as a heroic exploit: Jeanie is able to petition the Queen, who obtains the pardon. Elizabeth Bennet’s final argument with Lady Catherine de Bourgh prefigures this encounter, though—as we will see—in an inverted form: Austen’s ironies ultimately sabotage phonocentrism.

But Derrida himself sometimes underestimates the ability of literary language to resist phonocentrism. Paul de Man claims that Derrida’s account of phonocentrism in Of Grammatology is a “story” told “in order to dramatize, to give tension and suspense to the argument.” According to de Man, phonocentrism is not a historical phase: “the myth of the priority of oral language over written language has always already been demystified by literature, although literature remains persistently open to being misunderstood for doing the opposite. None of this seems to be inconsistent with Derrida’s insight, but it might distress some of his more literal-minded followers: his historical scheme is merely a narrative convention” (137-38). As we will see,

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8 Though Scott’s novel appeared after Austen’s death, both writers had overlapping audiences with shared assumptions about media. Austen took an interest in Scott, Scott reviewed Austen’s Emma, and they had the same publisher (Baker 582).

9 Recent critics have shown how the complications of historical evidence exceed Derrida’s “story” (Meighoo; Shershow). While Mladen Dolar praises Derrida’s work on phonocentrism (“The sheer extent of evidence is overwhelming, its coherence compelling”), he traces “a different metaphysical history of voice, where the voice, far from being the safeguard of presence, was considered to be dangerous” (42-43). Peter Knox-Shaw observes that “Pyrrhonist” skepticism about ancient historiography (alluded to by Austen’s Eleanor Tilney) was rebutted “by figures ranging from Voltaire, Hume, and Gibbon to Austen’s favourite divine, the egregiously empirical Thomas
*Pride and Prejudice* spends its first half evoking phonocentric myth and then demystifies it in the second half; because the demystifying process has already completed itself (having been written by Austen) before the reader begins the text, the demystification has happened before it happens. A clearer example of the literary process sketched by de Man would be hard to find. The remarkable “lucidity” de Man ascribes to Rousseau’s writing belongs just as much to Austen’s (de Man 136), and her resistance to phonocentrism is an unappreciated aspect of her genius. The story of *Pride and Prejudice* is a plausible representation of certain aspects of genteel British life c. 1800. But it is also an allegory of the text’s formal operations. The novel gives more than mimetic guidance about the phenomenal world (“don’t trust smooth-talking men”): it dramatizes its own materiality and reads its own unfolding. Following the path of the novel’s allegory will, I hope, show how.

Volume I of *Pride and Prejudice* consistently links Darcy to writing and reading. His bookishness could be a symptom of his shyness, and one could read his textual activities as representations of his personality. But there are other plausible ways Austen could have presented Darcy: as a taciturn hunter, for example. She reiterates the association of Darcy with writing so often that it has an allegorical, rather than a solely mimetic, effect: it presents Darcy not only as an individual person (one who favors writing) but as a sign of writing. Early chapters establish Darcy’s discomfort with ballroom culture, a discomfort crystallized in the motto “Every savage can dance” (Austen 28). In Austen’s work, dancing “is almost exclusively an occasion for conversation” (Tanner 131), and dancing entails, even in the Regency era, close proximity, presence. The initial aversion to dancing aligns Darcy with absence and something other than speech. Darcy’s insulting dismissal of Elizabeth (“not handsome enough to tempt me”), spoken within her hearing, marks him as a man who cannot control his voice (12; emphasis in original). During Elizabeth’s stay at Netherfield, Darcy reads a book after dinner instead of playing cards, and his literary “progress” becomes the object of “Miss Bingley’s attention” (60). Miss Bingley, trying to get his attention, begins to stroll down the room: “Her figure was elegant, and she walked well;—but Darcy, at whom it was all aimed, was still inflexibly studious” (61). In the next chapter, he tries to avoid showing Elizabeth any sign that “could elevate her with the hope of influencing his felicity . . . he scarcely spoke ten words to her through the whole of Saturday, and though they were at one

Sherlock”; out of such rebuttals arose “a clear-cut distinction between written evidence and oral tradition—the latter only classed as untrustworthy” (116).
time left by themselves for half an hour, he adhered most conscientiously to his book, and would not even look at her” (66).

The conflict between Darcy and Wickham is, of course, a moral conflict between two men, yet it is also a contest between writing and speech. Long before Wickham’s first appearance in the novel, Austen carefully prepares this media contest by contrasting Darcy’s bookishness with the conversational talent of a series of foils. Austen first sets up a contrast between Bingley’s friendliness and Darcy’s reserve. One night Bingley offers Elizabeth the use of his books, apologizing for his lack of attention to his library (41). Darcy speaks up, rather rudely, to defend his own bibliophilic devotion: “I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these” (41). This gives rise to a debate on the achievements necessary for an “accomplished woman.” Caroline Bingley reels off a list, which Darcy supplements with “something more substantial”: “the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (43). Later, “Mr. Darcy was writing, and Miss Bingley, seated near him, was watching”; she offers “perpetual commendations . . . either on his hand-writing, or on the evenness of his lines, or on the length of his letter” (51). After claiming that Darcy “does not write with ease. He studies too much for words of four syllables,” Bingley describes his own writing: “My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to express them—by which means my letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to my correspondents” (52; emphasis in original). Darcy chides him: Bingley’s “appearance of humility” is “an indirect boast” (53). These scenes reinforce a binary pattern that has been in development for several chapters: Darcy always appears as the defender of writing instead of speech, deliberation instead of spontaneity, reserve instead of friendliness. Later, Darcy’s cousin takes Bingley’s place: Colonel Fitzwilliam’s urbane conversation highlights Darcy’s taciturn rudeness (192).

Wickham’s “appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address” (80-81). Wickham tells Elizabeth: “the late Mr. Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift”; alas, “there was just such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to give me no hope from law. A man of honour could not have doubted the intention, but Mr. Darcy [the younger] chose to doubt it” (89). Darcy comes off as a mean literalist who adheres to the dead letter and violates the spirit of the will. Wickham reinforces the contrast: “I have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may

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10 When Darcy at last shows that he has some talent for speech, it backfires (211). Darcy talks without heeding his audience, and unlike Wickham, he cannot harmonize speech with its accessories: Darcy “spoke of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security. Such a circumstance could only exasperate farther” (212; emphasis in original).

11 In the next chapter, his appearance receives even greater praise (85).
perhaps have sometimes spoken my opinion of him, and to him, too freely” (89; emphasis in original). Once again, Darcy is a cold man of writing, while his foil is a “warm” man of spontaneous speech. It is a tribute to Austen’s mimetic skill that more people do not notice how allegorically (and unrealistically) opposite Wickham and Darcy are. As Edward Neill observes, Wickham is “a shadowy character made out of differences from Mr. Darcy without positive terms—money/no money; ethics/no ethics; charmless/charming” (63). Wickham is the only important male character who does not write anything over the course of the novel, though Darcy recalls that after Wickham’s father died, the son wrote a letter asking Darcy to pay him upfront, instead of giving him the promised ecclesiastical living; “He had some intention, he added, of studying the law,” a proposal that Darcy dismisses as a “mere pretence . . . his life was a life of idleness and dissipation” (Austen 223). Although lawyer and clergyman are two of the most plausible professions for Wickham (whose father was a lawyer), it is allegorically significant that he fails at the arts of letters and becomes a soldier, since arms and letters are conventionally opposed professions.  

Felicia Bonaparte argues that the contest between these men teaches Elizabeth about the superiority of empiricism to rationalism. Bonaparte grounds *Pride and Prejudice* in the philosophical debates of Austen’s time. This is an important contribution, since the philosophical pertinence of Austen’s work has not received enough notice. Yet Bonaparte is not wholly persuasive: “Elizabeth herself begins with the assumption that what is reasonable must, by that very token, be true. Wickham’s ‘account’ of the relationship between Darcy and Lady Catherine, seeming to be ‘rational,’ seems to her therefore implicitly right”; Elizabeth must “learn that the rational may be false” (145-46). Wickham’s account, however, does not seem rational. A logical flaw runs through his speech: he says he will not “expose” Darcy though that is exactly what he just did (Austen 89). His persuasiveness derives, as Elizabeth admits, from his natural delivery, not his rationality; “Besides, there was truth in his looks” (96). At one point, she seems indifferent to the subject matter (let alone the rationality) of his speech: his conversational “skill” can make even the “most threadbare topic . . . interesting” (85). Wickham appeals not so much to Elizabeth’s rationalist, as to her phonocentric, prejudice. Without his amiable voice and body, his specious reasoning might not stand a chance.  

Though the word “phonocentric” may be recherché, the experience depicted by Austen is commonplace.

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12 See, for example, Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part 1, Chapters 37-38 (337-43).

13 Elizabeth “had at first been taken in by Wickham’s plausible physical manner, but she gradually comes to put more trust in Darcy’s authoritative writing-manner” (Tanner 112).
Writing the letter that anatomizes Wickham’s sins, Darcy lacks Wickham’s advantages. His formal prose does not imitate a spontaneous voice or encourage Richardsonian intimacy. Darcy writes: “—Wilfully and wantonly to have thrown off the companion of my youth, the acknowledged favourite of my father, a young man who had scarcely any other dependence than on our patronage, and who had been brought up to expect its exertion, would be a depravity, to which the separation of two young persons, whose affection could be the growth of only a few weeks, could bear no comparison” (218-19). This periodic sentence, loaded with alliterating dyads, relative clauses, and appositive phrases—a sentence in which the main verb appears as the forty-second word—does not imitate speech (not even uptight Darcy’s speech).

While not all the letter is this elaborate, Darcy’s writing seems the result of diligence rather than spontaneous emotion. Neill cites the letter’s “insufferable orotundity” (54). Though a dignified rigidness straddles the letter and Darcy’s foregoing speech, his terse speech is at odds with the sudden orotundity of his writing. Moreover, as Mary A. Favret notes, “Darcy’s epistle . . . is less a confession (it offers little insight into the ‘personality’ Elizabeth will learn to love) than a legal defense” (149-50).

The physical form of the letter is significant. Darcy writes: “Whatever may be the sentiments which Mr. Wickham has created, a suspicion of their nature shall not prevent me from unfolding his real character” (Austen 222-23). May we be excused for finding a pun in “character” (moral disposition/unit of writing)? The truth of Wickham is written in the letter, which is folded for delivery. Elizabeth skims the letter and puts “it hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, that she would never look in it again. In this perturbed state of mind, with thoughts that could rest on nothing, she walked on; but it would not do; in half a minute the letter was unfolded again, and collecting herself as well as she could, she again began the mortifying perusal of all that related to Wickham” (227). The obstructive form of writing, its folding, provides a material emblem for a prominent aspect of Austen’s fictions: though they celebrate “generous candour” (230), their didactic progress depends on opacity, secrecy, and sometimes outright dishonesty—on deferrals or diversions of reference. In Emma, for example, Austen allows Knightley, the voice of good conduct, to disapprove of secrets. Yet, as D. A. Miller points out, “if all her characters behaved according to Mr. Knightley’s principles . . . there would be no source of narratability” (Narrative 40). Likewise, though Elizabeth “had scorned Mr. Collins’s imputation that ladies never say what they mean, at the end of Pride and

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14 Joseph Litvak notes that with “when characters in [Austen’s] work suggest . . . the artifice and materiality of written characters, moralism encounters significant obstacles” (763; emphasis in original). See also David Oakleaf.
Elizabeth refuses to answer Lady Catherine and lies to her mother about the motives for that lady’s visit. Furthermore, Elizabeth checks herself with Mr. Darcy, remembering “that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin” (Gilbert and Gubar 161). Deferral of understanding is an unwritten rule of Austen’s novels. Consider the case of Caroline Bingley: she is right about the difference between Wickham and Darcy and gives an early warning to Elizabeth (Austen 106), but she gets nothing in return. Even Mr. Collins and Lady de Bourgh achieve comic grandeur, while Caroline just seems petty—despite, or maybe because of, her apparent exemption from the media prejudices that misguide other characters. The novel maroons her on plain old snobbery.

While Darcy’s letter reveals secrets, it owes much of its potency to its folding; his first marriage proposal was too open. The written truth of Darcy’s letter does more than blot out the falsehood of Wickham’s speech—fortunately so, or there would not be much reason (besides fulfilling conventional romantic expectations) for the novel to continue for another volume. Despite his orotundity, Darcy does not idealize his letter. He avoids graphocentrism by annexing the letter to speech: “For the truth of everything here related, I can appeal more particularly to the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who . . . has been unavoidably acquainted with every particular of these transactions” (225). The letter is a means of delayed, yet incomplete, self-mastery. Though Darcy supplements his poor conversational performance with a letter, he recognizes that the letter itself may need supplements (the colonel’s “testimony”). He does not pitch his letter as an autonomous receptacle of truth.

Elizabeth’s reaction is more ironic than most commentators have acknowledged, and its ironies show that plenty of work remains for the novel to do. Having read Darcy, Elizabeth “perfectly remembered every thing that had passed in conversation between Wickham and herself, in their first evening at Mr. Philips’s. Many of his expressions were still fresh in her memory. She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before” (229; emphasis in original). Darcy’s letter seems to challenge the claim in Plato’s Phaedrus that writing only promotes bad memory (reminding), not the good memory (anamnesis) that speech, especially Socratic dialogue, can produce (275a; Plato 520; Derrida, Points 234). Perhaps not coincidentally, British interest in Plato was booming in the 1790s (Evans 107), the decade when Austen started to write the novel. Darcy’s letter enables Elizabeth for the first time to know what Wickham was really saying, to read his “impropriety.” Her reading inverts phonocentrism: now writing

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15 Oakleaf points out that “Darcy challenges Elizabeth’s character of Wickham by offering auricular proof” (300).
becomes true, good, and instructive, while speech is false, bad, and delusive. Free indirect discourse, however, should qualify our response to Elizabeth’s response: the slippage from “she perfectly remembered every thing” to “Many of his expressions were still fresh in her memory” (emphasis added) reveals that these statements record Elizabeth’s momentary convictions, not the narrator’s authoritative insistence.

Thus, Elizabeth’s claim to tardy self-knowledge should not be taken altogether seriously, though her openness to self-criticism is no doubt commendable:

“How despicably have I acted!” she cried.—“I, who have prided myself on my discernment!—I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.—How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet, how just a humiliation!—Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.—Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.” (Austen 230)

Is she literally crying these words aloud when someone at Rosings could overhear her, or is this a silent, paradoxically internal, outburst? We cannot tell. The cry braids distinct media: its sentence fragments and exclamation points suggest the informality and volatility of speech, but the dashes, which may indicate intense emotion, are also frequent in Darcy’s legalistic letter, and Elizabeth’s penultimate sentence is a Johnsonian period worthy of that letter. She produces a fine example of what Derrida calls “writing in the voice” (Points 140). The irony of the passage is that when she proclaims her self-knowledge, she sounds (or reads) more like Darcy’s letter than herself. The claim, “I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned,” echoes Darcy, who writes: “ignorant as you previously were of every thing concerning either” (225). Though she did not possess full self-knowledge in her transactions with Wickham, she has not acquired it in rereading Darcy’s letter.

The novel incrementally reveals how even spontaneous speech bears the trace of writing (or, more accurately, arche-writing). Elizabeth’s witty comparison of conversation to piano playing suggests that there is something textual and

16 Heavy use of the dash is the most visually striking aspect of Austen’s own personal letters, though most of the other letters in the novel use the dash far more sparingly than Darcy’s.
mechanical about conversation. It is not purely spontaneous, nor is it a natural talent: it is an acquired skill that allows improvisation but often succeeds through iteration (through practice reading “black scores”). The facility acquired through conversational practice can result in gaffes as well as elegant banter. Accordingly, Elizabeth’s dialogue sometimes reveals a deficit of self-presence. Earlier in the novel, though she is intent on not dancing with Darcy, she accepts his abrupt invitation, “without knowing what she did . . . and she was left to fret over her own want of presence of mind” (101). This minor and totally plausible scene illustrates how speech can function like writing, how fossilized politeness can kick in, disrupting self-present speech. In the dance that follows, Darcy asks her what she thinks about books. She declines the topic: “‘No—I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else.’ ‘The present always occupies you in such scenes—does it?’ said he, with a look of doubt. ‘Yes, always,’ she replied, without knowing what she said, for her thoughts had wandered far from the subject” (104-05; emphasis in original). She wants to exclude books from ball-room talk (the alliteration undercuts the speaker, hinting that the two are not so easily sundered). She claims to be engrossed by the present, but the absent Wickham is on her mind. One reason Austen was capable of resisting phonocentrism with such aplomb may be that she was aware from experience that much of what passes for conversation is, in Dussinger’s phrase, “inert, dead language” (4). The mimetic power of the novel does not derive from its avoidance or transcendence of “dead language,” but from the cleverness with which it reinscribes “dead language,” exploiting inertia to underwrite vivacity. After reading Darcy’s letter, Elizabeth becomes more conscious of “writing in the voice.” In encounters with Jane (241) and Lydia (353), she guards herself against blurring out what she wants to leave unsaid. Speech sometimes threatens to turn the speaker into an involuntary repeating device, like writing.

Wickham demonstrates that a man of speech can function like a piece of writing, stupidly repeating itself. When Elizabeth encounters him shortly before his regiment leaves town, he changes for the worse by not changing: “She had even learnt to detect, in the very gentleness which had first delighted her, an affectation and a sameness to disgust and weary” (258). Note that Elizabeth’s reaction to Wickham’s “gentleness” is no longer automatic: it is the product of studious deciphering. Though his good looks are self-evident, she has to learn “to detect” his “sameness.” There is a gap between the social phenomenon called Wickham and Elizabeth’s judgment, just as there is a gap between the visual arrangement of letters on a page and the meaning we read off them. Wickham is a slow learner. He seems to believe “that however long, and for whatever cause, his attentions had been withdrawn, her vanity would be
gratified and her preference secured at any time by their renewal” (259). Iterability—the potential for repetition, even in the absence of the writing subject—is what makes writing possible (Derrida, Limited Inc; Speech and Phenomena 50). Yet it turns out that speech also exhibits iterability. Wickham can only repeat his old routines, and he is so unknowing that he thinks others will repeat their earlier responses to him, as though his life were a series of rehearsals of the same script. His elopement with Lydia is a pathetic (though, ironically, more successful) repetition of his attempted elopement with Georgiana Darcy. Even after he elopes with Lydia, Mrs. Gardiner claims that he “was exactly what he had been, when I knew him in Hertfordshire” (Austen 359). When Wickham first visits the Bennet house after his marriage, he reassumes his old demeanor, unruffled by shame (349).

It is almost as though the novel were first affirming then inverting Socrates’ famous complaint in the Phaedrus that speakers can vary their discourse in response to interlocutors while a text can do nothing but repeat itself (Plato 275d-e; 521). Early on, Wickham personifies speech, while Darcy—“inflexibly studious” (Austen 61)—personifies repetitive writing. But later, Wickham’s versatility, his ease of adapting to strangers, morphs into a seedy repetition compulsion, while Darcy the stiff shows modest moral improvement (or, at least, amended geniality). Repetitions are not identical; the same differs (Derrida, Speech and Phenomena 129-60). When Wickham repeats himself in the second half of the book, he creates a different impression than he did when Elizabeth first met him, and Darcy’s bashfulness at the Bennet dinner table in the third volume (Austen 371) has a different effect than his previous, apparently identical, conduct.

The exposure of Wickham’s iterability prepares Darcy’s rehabilitation. Many critics have taken interest in Elizabeth’s visit to Darcy’s estate: her encounters with both the housekeeper and the portraits of Darcy play a significant role in modifying Elizabeth’s attitude toward him. Studying the larger portrait of Darcy grants her “a more gentle sensation toward the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. . . . Every idea that had been brought forward by the housekeeper was favourable to his character” (277). The paintings also testify to Darcy’s character. Painting is (of course) both like and unlike writing. On the one hand, “[p]ainting, like sculpture, is silent, but so in a sense is its model. Painting and sculpture are arts of silence. . . . The silence of the pictorial or sculptural space is, as it were, normal. But this is no longer the case in the scriptural order, since writing gives itself as the image of speech. Writing thus more seriously denatures what it claims to imitate” (Derrida, Dissemination 137). On the other hand, painting shares writing’s constitutive
iterability. Like a writer writing a text, the painter and the model (Darcy) collaborate to produce an image; this image may be intended to please a patron (Darcy’s father), but the audience of the painting will be anybody who happens to look at it. The model might have had specific intentions (to smile like a good son), but unforeseen spectators will find different meanings in the painting, meanings no doubt unanticipated by the model. Encountering his portrait, Elizabeth reads his gaze in the context of his earlier “impropriety”—a context that did not exist at the time the portrait was painted (Darcy had not met Elizabeth). When “she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression” (Austen 277). The fixing of the gaze is a fiction: rather than passively receiving information from the image, she uses it to revise her memory. Elizabeth later asks Darcy when he began to fall in love. He replies: “I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun” (421; emphasis in original). This is a plausible assessment of the limitations of human memory: if he wanted to “fix on” the cause, he could only do so by making up an origin story; etiology would require simplification, selective memory, Elizabeth’s softening. In a chat with Jane, Elizabeth also has trouble fixing the origin of her love (414). But these difficulties say something about love as well as memory. Love may have no simple (pure) origin: like a written sign, it can only emerge as a repetition. One of Austen’s achievements is to make many readers feel that its absent origin, its anti-foundational character, does not compromise love’s reality. The love between Elizabeth and Darcy contrasts with love at first sight, in which the lover (thinks he) knows that he began at the beginning.

The depictions of Darcy (in paint and the housekeeper’s words) become supplements required for the redemption of the original. In Volume I, Elizabeth met Darcy, and things went awry. Volume III re-unfolds their acquaintance: now she meets the copies before the original appears. First Wickham united gentleness of voice and physical beauty. Then Darcy vindicated himself by writing a letter that could mortify his beloved but could not render him attractive to her. At last, through the portrait and the housekeeper’s voice, Pemberley succeeds in making Darcy

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17 The medium of the novel minimizes the difference between writing and painting—as it does that between print and manuscript (Favret 148). Readers do not see the portrait of Darcy; they read about it. Readers consume the painting as a non-resemblance, as the difference Elizabeth imagines between the Darcy of the portrait and the Darcy she used to know.

18 William H. Galperin notes that since the portrait was taken during the life of the elder Mr. Darcy, it was to some extent solicited or influenced by the not-yet-dead father (130).
attractive, but the two media of attraction, looks and speech, united in Wickham, are split. Darcy himself will soon appear and earn Elizabeth’s admiration by treating the Gardiners cordially, but unlike Wickham, he has to be rent before he can become whole (as Yeats might put it). If one ignores the play of media (that is, if one reads the chapter as straightforward mimesis), Austen’s account of the visit to Pemberley seems to indulge in patriarchal kitsch. But Austen does not sentimentalize the origin of love; she leaves that to her readers.

Though nothing could be more common in a story than the disappearance and reappearance of a character, the novel shuffles Darcy and his copies so frequently that it underscores the oscillation between presence and absence (Neill 53; Greenfield 346). Elizabeth is “Amazed at the alteration in his manner since they last parted. . . . when he spoke, his accent had none of its usual sedateness; and he repeated his enquiries as to the time of her having left Longbourn, and of her stay in Derbyshire, so often, and in so hurried a way, as plainly spoke the distraction of his thoughts” (Austen 278). While Wickham disgusted her with the “sameness” of his speech, Darcy now amazes her with his changed accent. Yet Austen complicates the reversal by making repetitive “enquiries” a symptom of Darcy’s change. Repeating himself, he becomes more like Wickham, but in a way that punctuates their difference: while Wickham’s conversational “sameness” is the result of chronic insincerity, Darcy’s repetitiveness marks a refreshing change and implies genuine feeling.

Darcy’s variability continues to augment. After their meeting, he quickly disappears. Just as the text revealing Wickham’s “real character” had to be folded and unfolded multiple times, so the original Darcy cannot arrive all at once, but racks up presence through a series of intermissions. He disappears from the novel at Rosings, reappears in the form of a portrait and the housekeeper’s praise, disappears when Elizabeth leaves the house, reappears when he accidentally crosses her path, disappears after an embarrassed conversation, then reappears to ask for an introduction to her uncle and aunt (281). In the first chapter of Volume III, Darcy’s original becomes derivative.19 This is how writing works. For a written mark to

19 Derrida claims that “immediacy is derived” (Of Grammatology 157) and discusses how archeco-writing challenges “the myth of the simplicity of origin” (92). Free indirect discourse (FID) also challenges this myth. FID involves the apparent melding of at least two entities, a narrator and a character. Laura Buchholz surveys theorists of FID and observes that they usually privilege one of these entities over the other (207). Buchholz proposes that we think of FID in terms of morphing, rather than mimicry; “Otherwise, the character’s voice potentially becomes a caricature, thus, in my view, reducing the voice’s authenticity” (207). But Buchholz’s clever attempt to preserve authenticity is unwarranted: inauthenticity is part of the pleasure of FID, especially in Austen. FID is a form of coquetry, tempting readers with “direct access” (207) to a character’s thoughts, but also reminding readers that this directness is indirect, is mediated by the narrator, who is herself—thanks
function as writing, it must repeat a pre-existing convention; otherwise, it would appear as a random doodle or accidental stain. Iterability, the “factor that will permit the mark (be it psychic, oral, graphic) to function beyond” the moment of its inscription, “namely the possibility of its being repeated another time—breaches, divides, expropriates the ‘ideal’ plenitude or self-presence of intention, of meaning (to say) and, a fortiori, of all adequation between meaning and saying. Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat ‘itself’” (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 61-62; emphasis in original). The original of Darcy was already a copy. Austen inaugurates Volume III by dramatizing this realization: at Darcy’s ancestral home, Elizabeth experiences or ogin as iterability, as an array of copies.

Such repetition will empower Elizabeth. Lady de Bourgh drives to Longbourn to prevent her marriage: “I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you” (Austen 392). Elizabeth triumphs in this contest by refusing to promise not to marry Darcy. She does not openly confess her love, and her reticence “could only exasperate” Lady de Bourgh “farther.”

Engaged at last to Darcy, [Elizabeth] soon learnt that they were indebted for their present good understanding to the efforts of his aunt, who did call on him in her return through London, and there relate her journey to Longbourn, its motive, and the substance of her conversation with Elizabeth; dwelling emphatically on every expression of the latter, which, in her ladyship’s apprehension, peculiarly denoted her perverseness and assurance, in the belief that such a relation must assist her endeavors to obtain that promise from her nephew, which she had refused to give. But, unluckily for her ladyship, its effect had been exactly contrariwise (407; emphasis in original).

Readers have noted the irony that Lady de Bourgh’s attempt to thwart the marriage brings it on (Jenkyns 17; Phelan 295). But the irony of this sequence ramifies if we consider the grammatical implications. When Lady Catherine visits Longbourn, Elizabeth thinks she must have come to deliver a letter from Charlotte: “But no letter appeared, and she was completely puzzled” (Austen 390). Letters pile up in Volume III, but Lady de Bourgh refuses to make her “sentiments known” through a letter: she insists on travelling far away to the Bennets’ house to exert the fullness of her aristocratic presence. As Laure Blanchemain puts it, she “firmly believes in the

to FID—a network of different voices, rather than a unified point of origin. Unlike the eyes of Darcy’s portrait, the cognitive content of FID cannot be “fixed.”
biblical equation between the word and the thing itself, as if by simply saying things she could make them happen” (114). Though she has not borne a letter to Longbourn, she there becomes a letter to Darcy. Eschewing the convenience of writing, she visits him, and, like a letter, repeating words whose ultimate significance she does not know, she has an effect she does not intend. Perhaps her biggest mistake is repeating exactly what Elizabeth said. Her indulgence in iterability, “dwelling emphatically on every expression,” not only gives her nephew a hint that Elizabeth would favor a second proposal, but authenticates the hint with direct quotation; a loose paraphrase or summary may have given him less confidence. Elizabeth’s responses to Lady Catherine wed pride and cunning irony. Unable to anticipate the exact outcome of her defiance, Elizabeth nonetheless writes lines under her enemy’s words, transmitting a coded message to Darcy. The absent writer (Elizabeth), who cannot communicate the message (her desire) in person to the reader (Darcy), does so through the text of Lady de Bourgh’s speech.

This confrontation enacts arche-writing, the trace that makes possible both speech and writing. According to Derrida, the dominant, though reductive, concept of writing (of writing, for example, as mere ink marks on paper designed to represent sounds) “could not have imposed itself historically except by the dissimulation of the arche-writing, by the desire for a speech displacing its other and its double and working to reduce its difference”; arche-writing “threatened the desire for the living speech from the closest proximity, it breached living speech from within and from the very beginning” (Of Grammatology, 56-57; emphasis in original). The common idea of writing as “an instrument enslaved to a full and originally spoken language” arises to conceal language’s impurity of origin and lack of fullness. Phonocentrism positions writing as utterly contingent, if not parasitic, on the speech (or thought) it represents; this idea of writing permits speech the illusion of autonomy. It can be difficult, however, to maintain the illusion. Lady de Bourgh, who goes to great lengths to exercise the prerogatives of speech and presence, ends up becoming an instrument that exhibits qualities often attributed to writing (iterability and ignorance). Michaelson, reading Pride and Prejudice as a conversation manual, considers this exchange between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine the book’s “true climax” (210), but the exchange brings about a witty reversal of eighteenth-century elocution. While elocutionists claimed that mastering the proper oral delivery of texts could transform readers into competent public speakers, Lady Catherine—so confident in her

20 Lydia’s letters to Kitty “were much too full of lines under the words to be made public” (Austen 264). This was a popular mode of encryption (515).
speaking ability—becomes a self-defeating private text. What secures the defeat is Elizabeth’s rude evasiveness—an unconventional elocutionary tactic.

Iterability takes time. The delay between the raising of phonocentric expectations and their demystification enables *Pride and Prejudice* to be read as a de Manian allegory, though one that relapses into mimesis. De Man argues that the “relationship between signs” in allegory “necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition...* of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority” (207; emphasis in original). Wickham, the novel’s primary agent of phonocentrism, functions allegorically: his “gentleness,” first a pleasing component of his outward behavior, subsequently becomes a sign of “affectation and sameness,” of an anterior falseness that makes his charm retroactively insipid (Austen 258). While the outward behavior remains the same, a secondary meaning attaches to it, a non-spontaneous meaning that belies the obvious or habitual interpretation of social phenomena. Consequently, Austen’s narrative performs “a properly allegorical reading since what it does is to convert something available to the senses into a figure for a meaning that bears no necessary or motivated relation to the phenomenal aspect of that figure” (Warminski 25). There is no necessary link between phenomena of “gentleness” and the moral truth of “affectation.” The quality of “sameness” is not visible in any instance of Wickham’s behavior: it becomes readable in the repetition of the behavior. Here Austen departs from one aspect of the British epistolary novel, which, despite (or by means of) its self-referential orientation, links truth to the senses. As Michael McKeon observes, “in the first edition” of *Pamela*,

Richardson appears only as the “editor” of an authentic set of documents that constitute a true “History.” . . . Because it is a documentary history, *Pamela* is not a romance, and it is singularly qualified thereby for moral instruction and improvement. The familiar rationale links Richardson not only to the established strain of naïve empiricism in narrative but

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21 For de Man, allegory is relevant to novelistic structure as well as poetic diction (200-04). He contrasts allegory with “a mimetic mode of representation in which fiction and reality could coincide” (222).

22 Austen’s response to the epistolary novel is by no means straightforward; see my essay “Jane Austen’s Epistolarity.”
also to the Protestant conviction that concrete and sensible means provide the best mediation to moral and spiritual ends. (357)

The temporal displacement characteristic of allegory distinguishes Austen’s work from Richardsonian “writing to the moment,” which fetishizes the empirical activity of composition, strengthening the novelist’s “claim to historicity” (McKeon 358). *Pride and Prejudice* makes no such claim.

Austen’s characters engage in repetitive acts that rewrite who they always were, unsettling their histories. This transition is cognitively irreversible. Although Elizabeth’s perspective shapes our understanding of Wickham and Darcy (especially in the first half of the novel, where letters are infrequent), once we have finished the novel we can never see these men as Elizabeth initially saw them; her misreading becomes “pure anteriority” to us. Indeed, having reread Darcy’s letter, Elizabeth herself can no longer see Wickham as she used to; she can no longer coincide with herself. She eventually takes advantage of allegory’s splitting effect. Her refusal to cooperate with her interrogator is to Lady Catherine a sign of her “perverseness and assurance” (Austen 407); Lady Catherine’s account of her “perverseness and assurance” becomes for Darcy a sign of Elizabeth’s desire, something he cannot see directly, but can read indirectly.

The fate of Wickham’s name exemplifies the “temporal element” of allegorical reading. First (so to speak), “Wickham” is the proper name of a particular man to whom the text attributes a phenomenal form, handsomeness. The novel eventually reveals that Wickham is (and was) “wicked.” The name continues to refer to the man, but he is no longer what Elizabeth thought he was: his name has become the sign of a moral convention, “wickedness,” something non-phenomenal, just as an allegorical use of the word “olive-branch” might indicate, in addition to part of a particular tree, the concept “peace,” which preexists any particular olive-branch that the writer may have seen or imagined. D. A. Miller argues that “[b]efore everybody in Meryton declares Wickham ‘the wickedest young man in the world’ . . . the novel has had three hundred pages to keep the association at bay, and even then it is given as the work of townspeople who, in their ignorance of just how bad Wickham has been, seem all the more unconsciously enslaved to alliteration” (*Jane Austen* 87). This comment, despite its panache, is uncharacteristically obtuse. Earlier in the novel, in a passage where *W* occurs even more frequently, Austen describes Jane’s discovery of Wickham’s “wickedness” (*Austen* 249). The decision to name Wickham

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23 Richardson maintained this editorial pretense in the first two editions of his last novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (Johnson 74).
“Wickham” was, as far as we know, Austen’s own. It does not make sense to argue that the novel is trying to keep at bay something that the novel voluntarily introduced. If Austen were so wary of wordplay, she could have picked a different name. The transformational discovery of the meaning is not immediate (it takes time, the passage from a proper name designating a person to a crypto-adjective designating a moral danger concealed by that person). Although the book delays the full-blown discovery of Wickham’s wickedness, and though first-time readers (no matter how paranoid) cannot immediately obtain this discovery, the letters of “Wickham” mark from the beginning his wicked promise. The allegorical significance of the name awaits, in mute anteriority, its belated recognition. This is not so different from what happens in any story that reveals that a seemingly good character is actually bad—or vice-versa. What makes Pride and Prejudice unusual—though maybe not unique—is that the transvaluation of the morality of characters (a main interest of the plot) runs parallel to a transvaluation of media: the seemingly good man of speech (Wickham) turns out to have been always bad, while the seemingly bad man of text (Darcy) turns out to have been good (enough). Thus, the moral turnaround maps onto the demystification of phonocentric “myth” that de Man argues is a perennial feature of literary language. Pride and Prejudice is doubly allegorical: first, because the behavior of characters takes on

24 As Margaret Doody puts it, “Austen, while producing multiple meanings, avoids obtrusive allegory—but not all allegory” (10). Though Doody describes the etymological absurdity of the name Wickham (114-15), no commentator, to my knowledge, has remarked that Ham was the wicked son of Noah, who spied his father’s nakedness, talked about it, and was dispossessed by him (Gen. 9.21-27). A clergyman’s daughter should have known this. Wickham verbally exposes Darcy, and his attempted elopement with Georgiana threatens to uncover the asexual decorum of Darcy’s family. Of course, “ham” may also designate preserved meat, a comic possibility that undermines the nefarious implications of the proper name. Thomas Dutoit offers a contrarian reading of Wickham as Darcy’s puppet-master, yet he also notes that Wickham suggests a candle wick (85). If we can hear le diable in Lydia (83), I suggest we hear dard in Darcy and contrast the javelin or dart of his virile rectitude with Wickham’s limp wick, whose phallic connotation is reinforced by ham/thigh, a biblical euphemism for male genitalia. Perhaps it is no coincidence that “Darcy” overlaps with “Daddy”: Elizabeth, transferred from patriarch to patriarch, leaves a passive bibliophile who claims to “abominate writing” (Austen 404) and joins herself to an active man adept at both reading and writing. After she marries, Mr. Bennet “delighted in going to Pemberley, especially when he was least expected” (427). Showing up unexpectedly used to be Darcy’s signature move.

25 Austen’s names are not as obviously allegorical as, say, Dickens’ names, but this discrepancy is significant. While the “cattylic tradition” operative in Fielding, Sterne, and Dickens suggests that “names express the nature of their bearers” (Barchas 135), in Austen the meaningfulness of names is rarely legible at first sight: the names do not help us to judge characters until after we have judged them. Rather than creating a sense of harmony between a person’s name and nature, they reveal how such harmonies are fictions, and material processes.
radically different meanings through repetition; second, because the activities of the characters are signs of the novel’s own linguistic operations, though the signs can “never coincide” with the operations, since the characters are only parts of the novel, not the novel itself, and since the acts of the characters are fictions while the rhetorical effects of the novel are real. *Pride and Prejudice* reads its materiality, but only in the tropological form of represented human interactions—that is, it reads its own linguistic functions as a story about conflicts between characters metonymically linked to speech, writing, or arche-writing. One cannot read the materiality as such: reading its materiality, the novel inevitably refers to things outside itself, producing a mimetic fiction.26 *Pride and Prejudice* does not rest content with a chiastic inversion of media prejudices. It takes a step beyond demystification and allegorizes the limits of its self-knowledge. Studies that foreground the moral education of Elizabeth or Darcy neglect Austen’s literary rigor, and in our period of media upheaval, Austen’s decomposition of media prejudice emerges as one of her novel’s most instructive accomplishments.

**Works Cited**


26 Warminski cautions that “in de Man, the materiality of language, materiality as such, is not ever something that we can know” (181).


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