"I HAVE finished the Novel called *Pride & Prejudice*, which I think a very superior work," wrote Anne Isabella Milbanke to her mother in May 1813. "It depends not on any of the common resources of Novel writers, no drownings, nor conflagrations, nor runaway horses, nor lapdogs & parrots, nor chambermaids & milliners, nor rencontres and disguises. I really think it is the *most probable* fiction I have ever read." After praising the book, Milbanke, who was to marry Lord Byron in 1815, began to wonder about its writer. "I wish much to know who is the author or ess as I am told." Milbanke’s opinions and curiosity—the responses of a woman outside of Jane Austen’s family and community—underscore another stage in Austen’s development as a writer. Her long apprenticeship as a writer of private fictions had come to an end. Finally, in the last decade of her life, she had begun to publish the six novels on which her subsequent reputation rests.

In turning now to the best known of these published and public works, *Pride and Prejudice*, I focus again on fictional conventions that concerned me in the discussions of Austen’s juvenilia and her “middle” works: the heroine and female friendships. *Pride and Prejudice*, like Austen’s other fictions published between 1811 and 1818, evinces...
her continuing efforts to revise the implausible conventions, including female characterizations and relationships, that generally purveyed domestic femininity in the eighteenth-century courtship novel. The novel shows as well that, in seeking to render these conventions with more verisimilitude, Austen drew on the cultures of both her female friends and her wider community.

I explore, too, the perspective expressed by the novel's plot resolution. *Pride and Prejudice*, and Austen's other novels as well, affirm patriarchal values with the resolution of marriage. None offers the heroine a refuge from marriage under the bower of female friendship. Nevertheless, her comic endings are not all the same. Some convey more conviction than others. Moreover, certain aspects of the ending itself, as well as other conventions in the novel, may subtly confirm or pull against the cultural perspective of its conclusion. I examine the comic ending of *Pride and Prejudice*, then, in order to weigh its investment in patriarchal values.

Because I also wish to talk about the process of interpreting while making an interpretation of Austen's work in this chapter, I concentrate on a single novel rather than discussing all six. I make explicit the kind of criticism that the concept of cultural duality has enabled me to produce for Austen's middle fictions and for this examination of *Pride and Prejudice*. Although my use of the term cultural duality has its origins in feminist scholarship outside of the discipline of literary studies, when used as a framework for interpreting Austen's fiction, it coincides to a large degree with the strategies and premises of American feminist literary criticism.² Because scholars have produced several rich American feminist interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice*, that novel makes an especially appropriate subject for a self-conscious discussion of feminist methodology.

Not just consistent with American feminist interpretations of the novel, the framework of cultural duality both enhances them and exposes their limitations. It shows that Austen created novels that are largely but not entirely accessible to an American feminist critical approach. In highlighting the area of inaccessibility, I call attention to historically specific and local influences on Austen's novels and to Austen as an author different, in part, from her feminist critics' vision of her. In doing so, I hope to make a case for a literary criticism that is both feminist and historically grounded.

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In 1816 Austen penned "Plan of a Novel," a parodic outline for a courtship novel. It strings together technical and thematic conventions that she had encountered in novels or that kin and acquaintances particularly admired. The "Plan" gives us a glimpse of some fictional conventions that amused her not in the late 1780s and early 1790s but in the second decade of the nineteenth century and that she revised for the novels she was publishing in this later period. There are some differences between the targets of the parodic juvenilia and of the "Plan," which attest in part to changes in literary tastes over those two decades. But there is continuity as well: in particular, the 1816 sketch, like Austen's earliest parodies, mocks domestic femininity as it was typically conveyed in the medium of the novel.

Because Austen made notes in the margins of the "Plan," identifying the kin or acquaintance whose tastes provoked some of the parodic conventions that compose it, we know that she was making fun not only of idealized heroines but also of her niece Fanny's preference for them when she proclaimed: "Heroine a faultless Character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment." And with a nod to her cousin Mary Cooke's wishes, she also imagined her heroine without "the least Wit." Austen does not directly ridicule the other key vehicle for the expression of domestic femininity, the didactic female friendship, although she does have the heroine draw back from one potential companion unlikely to seek moral improvement through female friendship: "The heroine's friendship to be sought after by a young Woman in the same Neighbourhood, of Talents & Shrewdness, with light eyes & a fair skin, but having a considerable degree of Wit, Heroine shall shrink from the acquaintance" (6:428, 429). Austen offered this depiction in mock deference again to her cousin Mary who, we may assume, found wit as inappropriate in the characterization of a female friend as in a heroine.

Published in the same decade, *Pride and Prejudice*, like some of Austen's earlier, private works, revises stereotypical representations of heroines and their female friendships. But what perspective on womanhood do the revisions convey? Critical commentary about Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of the novel, reveals disparate conceptions of her. The early nineteenth-century critic found the female protagonist's characterization consistent with contemporary, patriarchal norms. "Elizabeth's sense and conduct," claimed the *Critical Review* 's anonymous commentator in March 1813, two months after the book ap-
peared, "are of a superior order to those of the common heroines of novels. From her independence of character, which is kept within the proper line of decorum, and her well-timed sprightliness, she teaches the man of Family-Pride to know himself." The reviewer goes on to single out for approval the novel's instructional value: "An excellent lesson may be learned from the elopement of Lydia:—the work also shows the folly of letting young girls have their own way."4

Critics, however, have not always made judgments based on a standard of propriety. Many twentieth-century commentators, particularly in the rich post-World War II decades of Austen criticism, have praised the heroine's liveliness, wit, intelligence, charm, or physical vitality, while evincing little concern for an ideal of feminine decorum.5 But recently scholars have begun once again to evaluate Elizabeth Bennet's propriety, although they are drawing conclusions different from those of the writer for the *Critical Review* in 1813. Claudia Johnson suggested in 1988, for example, that "Austen's conviction that Elizabeth was 'as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print' was well-founded, for, as she could not have failed to realize, no heroine quite like Elizabeth Bennet had 'ever appeared in print' before. . . . Standing where we do, we tend either to overlook or to underestimate Elizabeth's outrageous unconventionality which, judged by the standards set in conduct books and in conservative fiction, constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety."6

Critics have viewed the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* so differently over time because their perceptions have been influenced by the changing context of literary criticism and the social ideologies that influence that criticism.7 The *Critical Review* 's commentator sounded no alarms about Elizabeth Bennet because his investment in patriarchal ideology very likely made it hard for him to see anything in her character that did not fit his particular vision of womanhood. Claudia Johnson's outlook, by contrast, is informed by American feminist criticism, itself propelled and influenced by the women's liberation movement, which began in the late 1960s. That criticism first tended to identify patriarchal "images of women" in the literary works of writers of both genders. By the mid 1970s, however, feminist critics had turned to identifying and applauding departures from patriarchal social and literary conventions by women writers and their representations. They have considered those divergences as the expression of a specifically female experience, view, or voice, and have treated that experience, view, or voice as either essentially female or socially constructed.

This second phase of American feminist criticism has made visible aspects of Elizabeth Bennet's character that were not perceptible to

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earlier generations of critics. It does not single out only the heroine’s vigor, her “critical energies,” or her “vivacity of thought and communication,” for most of these features have been cited and admired repeatedly by twentieth-century nonfeminist critics. Rather, feminist criticism also stresses the unconventional (because unladylike) character of these attributes. In keeping with this feminist critical activity and as a first step toward exploring cultural duality in this novel, I want to call attention to one such unconventional trait: not Elizabeth’s wit in particular but rather the expressive range of her talk in general. That talk is a particularly literal rendering of the “female voice” so central to feminist criticism. Moreover, when other characters in the novel comment on her talk, *Pride and Prejudice* treats the female voice thematically. “You give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person,” remarks Lady Catherine, for example, with some surprise (2:165-66). And in response to Elizabeth’s verbal liberties at Netherfield, her mother warns her not to “run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home” (2:42).

Confident in conversation and sure of her opinions, Elizabeth does not hesitate to convey either her certainty or her views. She decides on and tells Mr. Darcy of his main character flaw after being in his company only a few times: “Your defect is a propensity to hate everybody” (2:58). Similarly, she insists soon after that they have little in common: “I am sure we never read the same [books], or not with the same feelings” (2:93). She also readily shares her assessment of Mr. Darcy with Mr. Wickham: “I have spent four days in the same house with him, and I think him very disagreeable.” Quite certain as she is of her conclusions, she will offer her views to anyone. “I say no more here,” she assures Mr. Wickham, “than I might say in any house in the neighbourhood, except Netherfield [Mr. Bingley’s residence]” (2:77).

Under the cover of irony she sometimes assumes a dictatorial persona. Irony, because it is play, gives her license to dominate, but it does not nullify the impact of her assertive, indeed aggressive verbal behavior. Dancing with Mr. Darcy at the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth orders him to speak: “It is your turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy.—I talked about the dance, and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples” (2:91). To his courtly response, she adopts a queenly air. “Very well.—That reply will do for the present.—Perhaps by and bye I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones.—But now we may be silent” (2:91).

In her playfully domineering role, she refuses the silence and subordination marked out for women; she also assigns desires and senti-
ments to Darcy, preempting the expression of whatever his own may be. When he asks, “Do not you feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?” she sketches for him a melodramatic scene of an arrogant Darcy victimizing a bravely defensive Elizabeth: “You wanted me, I know, to say ‘Yes,’ that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have therefore made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all—and now despise me if you dare” (2:52).

In playfully switching roles with Mr. Darcy and assuming his dominance, Elizabeth implicitly challenges his power. In other interactions, with Colonel Fitzwilliam as well as Mr. Darcy, she is explicitly critical. She objects to his willfulness, to the “great pleasure” he takes “in the power of choice.” As she tells Colonel Fitzwilliam, “I do not know any body who seems more to enjoy the power of doing what he likes than Mr. Darcy” (2:183). Everyone, as the Colonel replies, likes to have his or her own way, but Elizabeth, and Colonel Fitzwilliam to some degree as well, are aware of the fact that some are more able to exercise their wills than others. Elizabeth knows that being a man in itself creates opportunities for “the power of choice” that women do not have, and in response to this inequality her recourse is, again, talk.

She watches Mr. Darcy demonstrate power based specifically on gender at a neighborhood ball. Because only gentlemen are endowed with the power to ask women to dance, as only they are empowered to propose marriage, Elizabeth has no option but to wait, partnerless, while Mr. Darcy relishes his power to decide to dance or not. “He walked here, and he walked there,” says Mrs. Bennet of his behavior at the ball (2:13), and while she is not in general a reliable witness, she captures nicely Mr. Darcy’s tendency at the ball to flaunt his power to choose by exhibiting himself detached and free. Single women like Elizabeth, who are not dancing, by contrast remain seated. Elizabeth suffers the embarrassment of his rejection but then challenges his power with verbal mockery, transforming the incident into a story which she tells “with great spirit among her friends” (2:12).

In or out of marriage, as Elizabeth notes, willful gentlemen like Mr. Darcy have particular advantages due to gender, and again she articulates and criticizes these advantages explicitly. The wife of such a man is very much “at his disposal,” she informs Colonel Fitzwilliam. “I wonder he does not marry, to secure a lasting convenience of that kind. But, perhaps his sister does as well for the present, and, as she is under
his sole care, he may do what he likes with her” (2:184).

Gentlemen also have some opportunities for the exercise of their wills due not specifically to their gender but to the social and economic independence that more generally falls to them because of it. Elizabeth articulates this advantage, broadening her critique to men other than Mr. Darcy. If everyone likes to have his own way, as Colonel Fitzwilliam tells Elizabeth, Darcy does have “better means of having it than many others, because he is rich, and many others are poor.”

He wishes to contrast himself to Darcy: “I speak feelingly. A younger son, you know, must be inured to self-denial and dependence” (2:183). But Elizabeth, accustomed to the greater and much more widespread dependence of gentlewomen, refuses to sympathize or to remain politely silent: “In my opinion, the younger son of an Earl can know very little of either. Now, seriously, what have you ever known of self-denial and dependence? When have you been prevented by want of money from going wherever you chose, or procuring any thing you had a fancy for?” (2:183). She expresses similar irritation at the freedom of choice possessed by Mr. Bingley because of his wealth: “If he means to be but little at Netherfield, it would be better for the neighbourhood that he should give up the place entirely,” she insists to Mr. Darcy. “But perhaps Mr. Bingley did not take the house so much for the convenience of the neighbourhood as for his own, and we must expect him to keep or quit it on the same principle” (2:178).

Bothered by men’s social and economic advantages over women, she is quick to identify with Mr. Wickham, the least prosperous and independent gentleman of her acquaintance. In so doing, she reveals the social limits of her sense of injustice: her concern does not extend to women or men beneath the status of the gentry. Mr. Wickham rapidly elicits Elizabeth’s sympathy because, as he represents it, his position is similar to that of a marginally genteel woman. His father began life, as he tells the heroine, as a country attorney just like her mother’s father and her uncle, Mr. Philips. Promised a clerical living by the elder Mr. Darcy, he finds himself, after the deaths of both his own father and the elder Mr. Darcy, dependent on the heir who, so he claims, has without cause elected not to honor his father’s promise.

Elizabeth chastises Mr. Darcy for victimizing Mr. Wickham, calling attention to his overbearing and unjust agency, in her repetitions of the second person pronoun: “You have reduced him to his present state of poverty, comparative poverty. You have withheld the advantages, which you must know to have been designed for him. You have deprived the best years of his life, of that independence which was no less his due than his desert. You have done all this!” (2:192). She
attacks Mr. Darcy on Mr. Wickham's behalf as well because she has been attracted to Mr. Wickham and believes that, in arbitrarily controlling the fates of other men, Mr. Darcy controls those of women, too. It is "that abominable Mr. Darcy" (2:144), Elizabeth thinks, who has blocked the possibility of her courtship by Mr. Wickham, just as it is Mr. Darcy who has separated Mr. Bingley from her sister Jane.

To convey awareness of sexual inequality and subtle and overt expressions of its unfairness, then, the heroine speaks with a female voice. But again it is important to note that that voice has, in effect, a limited register. If Elizabeth's sympathies do not extend to those without genteel social status, neither in her view does Mr. Darcy's oppression. She is preoccupied with his power only over those with whom she socializes. Not until she visits Pemberley does Elizabeth begin to realize the wide social range on which Mr. Darcy may impose his will: "As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!" (2:250-51). But she comes to appreciate the extensive reach of his power just at the moment when Mr. Darcy's housekeeper persuades her of his benevolent use of it among social inferiors.

American feminist criticism encourages us to recognize Austen's expression of a divergent, "improper" female voice within *Pride and Prejudice*. It also typically teaches us to see women writers curbing representations of that voice in response to the power of patriarchal ideologies. With its dual foci of expression and restraint, this feminist critical tradition, according to political theorist Kathy Ferguson, "always has to balance the ability of power to distort the worldview of the powerless with the ability of the oppressed to comprehend and transcend their confinement." In practice, however, balance has been difficult to achieve.

The work most responsible for developing and popularizing American feminist criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*, demonstrates this difficulty. It generally shifts in one direction or the other, giving more weight sometimes to female expression and sometimes to patriarchal restraint. In places it implicitly views the woman writer's divergences from "femininity" as conscious and denies any pervasive power to patriarchal ideologies. Indeed, its crucial palimpsest metaphor tends to make patriarchal ideologies into
“façades.” The metaphor likens the literary text to a series of sheets whose “surface designs” of conservative ideology conceal subversive “levels of meaning”: the woman writer’s expressions of rage and rebellion. But elsewhere, particularly in the introductory, theoretical section of their study, Gilbert and Gubar attribute considerable power to patriarchal ideologies, including the power to shape subjectivity, and they offer, consequently, a sustained examination of the forceful ideological constraints on women and their expressiveness. Although tilted in different directions, these two positions within American feminist criticism still rely on the same twofold interpretive procedure.

Feminist critics, then, have called attention not only to Elizabeth Bennet’s unconventionality but also to the ways in which Austen simultaneously qualified or contained it. One scholar has argued that the vulgar and defiant Lydia Bennet serves as “a decoy who attracts the disapproval to which Elizabeth herself could otherwise be subject.” The displacement, I would note, is verbal as well. When the heroine complains to her father about Lydia’s wild behavior, for example, her championship of feminine self-restraint diverts attention from her own usually unrestrained talk (2:231). Other critics have claimed that Elizabeth’s perception and treatment of Mr. Darcy are all bluster. One motive for her “rebelliousness,” according to Judith Newton, is “self-defense; she wants to resist intimidation and to deny Darcy’s particular assumption of control over her.” In doing so, “she is also defending herself against a desire to please Darcy and to enjoy the benefit of his positive attentions.” And a third strategy for qualifying Elizabeth Bennet’s unconventional talk has been located in the heroine’s repudiation of her own conduct, including her assertive and critical discourse. When she receives Mr. Darcy’s letter, she begins to regret her earlier behavior. Becoming more self-reflective and self-critical, Elizabeth wishes “that her former opinions had been more reasonable, her expressions more moderate!” (2:376).

Although I concur with the feminist critical emphasis on identifying qualifying strategies as well as the unconventional representations of womanhood that they limit, textual evidence does not support unambiguously all the strategies of constraint that critics have located in Pride and Prejudice. For example, if Elizabeth’s bold remarks to or about Mr. Darcy are defensive, she is just as self-confident and assertive on other topics and with other people—with her sister Jane, Lady Catherine, and even Mr. Bingley. “I understand you perfectly,” she informs him, although she has known him for only a few weeks (2:42). But more important, none of the constraining strategies that
critics have pinpointed takes us to the crucial site in *Pride and Prejudice* where the subversiveness of Elizabeth’s talk is most effectively limited. We can locate that site only with a biographical approach to the novel and only if we are familiar with Austen’s social and cultural contexts.

To understand how Austen qualified her heroine’s unconventional talk, we need to look to the source of Elizabeth Bennet’s characterization, and it is knowledge of Austen’s dual cultural allegiances that directs us to it. Feminist and nonfeminist critics alike who have considered the question of source usually have pointed to similarities between Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Austen, implying that the novelist stamped her heroine with her own personality. But how do we know Jane Austen? Identifications of Austen as Elizabeth Bennet are more textually based than critics have generally acknowledged. Access to Austen is mediated by the written testimonies of her relations and, more importantly, by her own letters. The self she conveys in her letters, as we have seen in earlier chapters, varies, depending on whether she was writing as a member of her community or as a member of her small band of intimate female friends. Her self-representation is closest to Elizabeth Bennet’s assertiveness when it is created by the discourse she directed exclusively to these female friends. Although Austen’s letters are generally more incisive and witty than those of her female neighbors and kin, it is important to remember that other women’s letters also produced unconventionally assertive female identities.

The Austen constructed by this woman-to-woman discourse, like *Pride and Prejudice*’s heroine, makes quick, confident, unqualified pronouncements. “I am quite tired of so many Children,” Austen writes to her niece Fanny in 1817, after announcing the pregnancies of another relative and a neighbor. She issues such opinions only to a few confidantes. “A Widower with 3 children has no right to look higher than his daughter’s Governess,” she tells her sister in 1807. The self who emerges from this private women’s discourse sometimes also expresses a playfully ironic awareness that she wants to dominate. And, as with Elizabeth Bennet, the irony does not negate the aggressiveness of her verbal behavior. “Make everybody at Hendon admire Mansfield Park,” she cheerfully commands her niece Anna in 1814. A letter to Cassandra, who was visiting Mrs. Knight in 1807, not only imagines that the two women will have “a great deal of unreserved discourse” but orders them to “abuse everybody but me.” Finally, the self created by the letter’s same-sex discourse can also be critical of men’s privileges and power: the tendency of oldest brothers to dominate their
siblings; fathers to ignore their daughters; husbands to boss their wives or to “sneer” at their unmarried sisters-in-law; and arrogant male acquaintances to assume their visits invariably welcome.\(^{20}\) This criticism, like Elizabeth Bennet’s, addresses the gender inequality only of elite men and women.

Female friends, then, not only tolerated but created and encouraged a self whose voice is confident, imaginative, and critical, although the criticism is not aimed at male domination outside their own social group. But if Austen made use of the key resource of her women’s culture in constructing the “voice” of *Pride and Prejudice*’s heroine, she also muted in a crucial way in the novel the relationships that produced that female voice. She placed the most powerful curb on her heroine’s unconventionality in the way she depicted the bonds among female characters.\(^{21}\)

Affectionate female friendships, to be sure, are dramatized in this novel, and there are more of them than critics have generally noticed.\(^{22}\) Emotional intimacy and frankness characterize the relationship of Elizabeth with Jane, Elizabeth with Charlotte Lucas, the two sisters with their aunt, Mrs. Gardiner, and Elizabeth with Georgiana Darcy, though this last tie is only asserted at the end of the novel and not dramatized. These women are quick to empathize with one another. Elizabeth can even read Jane’s feelings in the subtle play of her manners and expressions in a crowded ballroom (2:95). The friendships thrive best in privacy; women alone together are more open with one another than they generally are with others. Elizabeth tells “all her griefs to Charlotte Lucas” during a few minutes of quiet talk that they manage at the Netherfield ball, but friends also look for opportunities to converse out of public view (2:90). “When Jane and Elizabeth were alone, the former,” according to the narrator, “who had been cautious in her praise of Mr. Bingley before, expressed to her sister how very much she admired him” (2:14). And “when alone with Elizabeth,” her aunt “spoke more on the subject” of Jane’s relationship with Mr. Bingley (2:140).

Nevertheless, we cannot determine the moral and political valence Austen assigns to female relationships in *Pride and Prejudice* simply by showing that close female friendships appear in the novel. Our knowledge of Austen’s affiliations with two cultures enables us to see the limitations of this position. Female friendships, to be sure, were the linchpin in Austen’s women’s culture: they both generated and were represented by that culture. But the gentry’s domestic ideology also constructed a version of female friendship. To determine, then, whether female ties in *Pride and Prejudice* express the perspective of
the patriarchal culture of Austen's wider community or of the alternative culture of her female friends, we need to explore their functions.

What ends do the frank interchanges of female friends serve? They rarely fulfill the didactic function represented by the ideology of domesticity. Once, Mrs. Gardiner does attempt to advise Elizabeth, imparting a view espoused by that genteel ideology; she urges her niece not to cultivate affection for Mr. Wickham because he has no fortune. But the narrator's subsequent stress on the atypicality of Elizabeth's response reminds us that Austen was in *Pride and Prejudice*, as in the juvenilia, reacting against the courtship novel's stereotype of perfectly didactic female friendships: "Elizabeth having thanked her for the kindness of her hints, they parted; a wonderful instance of advice being given on such a point, without being resented" (2:145). In depicting friendship functioning to transmit instruction in domestic femininity, Austen distances her representation from the model version of this fictional convention. For the most part, however, she does not attempt transmissions of advice in *Pride and Prejudice* even when deidealized with narrative commentary.23 “We all love to instruct,” the heroine tells her sister Jane, “though we can teach only what is not worth knowing” (2:343; see also 333). In general, didactic communications are mocked in the novel—left to Mary Bennet, who pompously and ineffectually lectures her sisters on “thread-bare morality” (2:60).

More often, intimate friends in *Pride and Prejudice* engage in some of the behavior productive of and nourished by the women's culture. They discuss one another's romantic desires. To be sure, these interactions are male-centered, a point which has led Nina Auerbach and some other feminist scholars to criticize these relationships. Still, when friends talk to one another about their relationships with men, they are also providing one another with a context for the admission and nurturing of their desires. When Jane, for example, grows despondent over Mr. Bingley's departure for London, Elizabeth "forcibly" insists not that Jane should subdue her feelings but that Mr. Bingley will return to propose. As a result, Jane "was gradually led to hope . . . that Bingley would return to Netherfield and answer every wish of her heart" (2:120).

In acknowledging and encouraging one another's desires, these friends parallel Austen and her female kin and neighbors, when participating in their women's culture. But the fictional ties lack the bite, the subversiveness, that was also an important part of the women's culture. Elizabeth, as we have seen, speaks out boldly, but the novel does not locate her voice specifically within a community of women. Elizabeth is more likely to be verbally aggressive with Mr. Darcy, Mr.
Bingley, or Lady Catherine than with intimate female friends. She does not hesitate to express criticism of men to other men, complaining about Mr. Darcy to Colonel Fitzwilliam and about Mr. Bingley to Mr. Darcy. Although her forceful talk may betray a striking sense of autonomy, she does not make autonomy a topic of conversation with Jane or Charlotte or her aunt, nor do these female characters encourage one another to express dissent. No one complains to a female friend about the necessity of fulfilling female “duties” or wishes for more liberty and authority, as Austen and her female friends and neighbors did.

The limitations Austen placed on her heroine by obfuscating the source of her unladylike discourse become particularly apparent when we compare aspects of *Pride and Prejudice* to Austen’s middle fictions. For *Lady Susan*, Austen had drawn on the women’s culture for a fantasy of empowerment, of “women on top,” achieved through female solidarity. *Pride and Prejudice* avoids such a vision, as a comparison of Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas’s relationship to that of female friends in *Lady Susan* makes clear. Whereas in *Lady Susan* women band together to achieve the goal of marriage to men of fortune, Charlotte Lucas’s purely economic motives for marrying alienate Elizabeth and weaken their bond. When Charlotte, in one of their private conversations, argues in favor of an insincere behavior intended to catch an affluent husband regardless of his character, Elizabeth does not believe she is in earnest. When Charlotte proceeds to act on her beliefs, Elizabeth feels “the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem” (2:125). Elizabeth believes that women should marry for love and not just a competence, and she is also disturbed by Charlotte’s blunt concern for her own economic dependence and by her efforts to do something about it. Jane urges Elizabeth not to acknowledge and accept the mercenary motive behind Charlotte’s marriage but to “be ready to believe, for every body’s sake, that she may feel something like regard and esteem for our cousin” (2:135). But Elizabeth cannot bring herself to believe Jane’s rosy interpretation, and Charlotte’s engagement introduces a “restraint” between them. “Elizabeth,” the narrator notes, “felt persuaded that no real confidence could ever subsist between them again” (2:127, 128).

*The Watsons*, the other “middle” work, portrays candid discussions between two sisters about the economic subordination of women. Despite this concern for female poverty, it proffers, albeit in its unfinished state, close female friendships as a preferable alternative to marriage. This perspective *Pride and Prejudice* eschews as well, as a comparison between scenes from each work demonstrates.
On one of Mr. Darcy's visits to Elizabeth at the Collins's parsonage, he suggests, referring to Mrs. Collins, that fifty miles is not far for a woman to travel to visit her family. His remark is similar to one made by Lord Osborne when he and Tom Musgrave come to call on the Watson sisters. Any woman, the nobleman unthinkingly assures Emma Watson, can get exercise on horseback if she desires it. Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Watson make similar points in response, reminding their visitors that financial resources must underwrite travel or horseback riding and that financially independent men and women dependent on not-very-affluent male relatives will understandably often have different perspectives on what is possible. "The far and the near," Elizabeth corrects Mr. Darcy, "must be relative, and depend on many varying circumstances. Where there is fortune to make the expense of travelling unimportant, distance becomes no evil. . . . I am persuaded my friend would not call herself near her family under less than half the present distance" (2:179). Although Emma Watson's answer is like Elizabeth Bennet's, her blunter tone betrays her greater psychic distance from men: "Female Economy will do a great deal my Lord, but it cannot turn a small income into a large one" (6:346). But there are even more significant differences in the two scenes.

Both heroines experience their unexpected callers as intruders, but only in The Watsons are the men shown to break in on women alone together in an alternative, solacing domestic society that they have created for themselves. When the gentlemen arrive, Emma and her sister are about to sit down to the nourishments of companionship and an informal dinner. In Pride and Prejudice, by contrast, female society is merely alluded to—Elizabeth Bennet is writing to her sister when Mr. Darcy enters the room. Moreover, Emma Watson is not just surprised and ashamed when the men call but also resentful, while Elizabeth Bennet feels only "very great surprise" at Mr. Darcy's entrance (2:177).

Although Pride and Prejudice, then, does offer a series of female friendships, we may construe those alliances as a sisterhood of women only if we mean by sisterhood the affection and support that women give other women. The novel does not portray sisterhood as a political constituency, showing women aware of themselves as a distinct, egalitarian group united in the context of their discontent with patriarchal and hierarchical social relations. Pride and Prejudice's sisterhood is neither antithetical nor alternative to marriage. Elizabeth may be critical of men's privileges and power, but sisterhood does not generate this critique.

With a feminist approach, we identify a female expressiveness—in
Representing Two Cultures

*Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s conversation—and we expect to find it qualified or mediated. But awareness of Austen’s context, specifically her dual cultures, enables us to see that in this novel expression is itself also restraint. The “female voice” is its own mediation. Elizabeth Bennet’s bold talking stands in for a community of female voices—and points us toward its absence.

The plot that incorporates Elizabeth Bennet’s complex characterization ends with her marriage to Mr. Darcy. Austen’s long-term views and previous experience of writing plot resolutions suggest that we should pay particular attention to *Pride and Prejudice*’s ending. Some of her earliest juvenilia, works such as “Frederic & Elfrida,” ridicule novels that conclude with trite, implausible, or overly sentimental marriages, and Austen’s 1816 “Plan of a Novel” confirms that she remained critical of cliché and melodrama in comic resolutions in the decade when she was publishing novels. The heroine, so the “Plan” declares, “at last in the very nick of time, turning a corner to avoid him [the Anti-hero], runs into the arms of the Hero himself. . . . The Tenderest & completest Eclaircissement takes place, & they are happily united” (6:430). Moreover, parodic juvenilia such as “The Beautifull Cassandra” show awareness of endings as expressions of a cultural perspective, and *Lady Susan* and *The Watsons*, as the framework of cultural duality enabled us to see, manifest her conflicts over the perspective she wanted her plot endings to convey. That framework will make it possible for us to probe the ending of *Pride and Prejudice* as well. The resolution depicts the heterosexual and hierarchical union that constituted, so the gentry believed, the destiny of feminine women. But does the novel consistently, uniformly endorse that destiny?

The answer, as with commentary on the novel’s heroine, depends on the social and literary views of the critics responding. Austen’s contemporaries assumed that the plot resolution unilaterally affirmed patriarchal values because they themselves subscribed to those values. Although none of the 1813 reviews specifically singles out *Pride and Prejudice*’s ending for analysis, we can infer their authors’ attitudes toward the ending from the lengthy plot summaries usually included in these essays. The anonymous writer for the *British Critic*, for example, saw nothing in the text to undermine the stability and pleasure of the concluding marriage. “Explanations of the different perplexities and seeming contrarieties, are gradually unfolded, and the two
principal performers are happily united."25 And a writer for the Critical Review expressed similar complacency about the resolution (and condescension toward women writers) when praising "the considerable ingenuity" of "the fair author" for her "mode of bringing about the final eclaircissment between her [Elizabeth Bennet] and Darcy."26

Critics' satisfaction with the marital fate of the heroine was expressed throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. Many modern critics have just celebrated the ending more overtly, praising the marriage as the desirable end point in the personal developments of both Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. "Their story," according to Stuart Tave, "comes to a happy ending earned by two properly humbled people who have learned to bear mortification and to rise under it with love."27 Pride and Prejudice, suggests Joseph Wiesenfarth, "ends not only with the total individual development of each character but also with his total social development, because personal love is satisfied in marriage and harmonized with society."28 Some critics have also viewed the marriage as a metaphor for the harmonious union of antithetical, though often stereotypically gendered, social meanings. Thus for Lionel Trilling, "the relation of Elizabeth Bennet to Darcy is real, is intense, but it expresses itself as a conflict and reconciliation of styles: a formal rhetoric, traditional and rigorous, must find a way to accommodate a female vivacity, which in turn must recognize the principled demands of the strict male syntax."29 And for Tony Tanner, the marriage is a metaphor for the union of "playfulness and regulation—energy and boundaries."30

Feminist critics, who have commented on the novel's close in recent years, have expressed a much less cheerful view of the marital resolution. Often reminding readers that the nineteenth-century institution of marriage enforced women's legal, economic, and social subordination, they have reperceived Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's union as a deflating, even degrading fate for the heroine.31 They disagree, however, over Austen's attitude toward the marriage. Assuming Austen's commitment to it, Mary Poovey, for example, laments that the ending of Pride and Prejudice and Austen's other novels serves to "disguise the inescapable system of economic and political domination." "Romantic love," she explains, "seems to promise to women in particular an emotional intensity that ideally, compensates for all the practical opportunities they are denied."32

Other feminist critics have challenged the assumption that Austen was committed to the novel's resolution, and they have had to marshal what is usually quite subtle textual evidence in support of their view. This critical approach, once again, suspects the representation and
looks in or around it for evidence of another perspective, the "female voice." Carolyn Heilbrun, for example, refers to the "perfunctoriness of the endings of Jane Austen's novels."33 Susan Lanser sees in the courtship plot of *Pride and Prejudice* and the other novels Austen's "legacy of covers and silences."34 And Karen Newman has argued that Austen's novels "reveal the gap between sentimental ideals and novelistic conventions on the one hand, and the social realities of sexist prejudice, hypocrisy, and avarice on the other." *Pride and Prejudice*, according to Newman, both satisfies and undercuts the reader's expectations with concluding details marked with "self-consciousness and parody."35

A close look at the comic resolution does reveal some subtle, self-conscious divergences from the conventions of comic endings. It is not a glamorous or melodramatic coincidence but the ordinary gossip of Mr. Darcy's aunt that unites the hero with the heroine. Hearing that her nephew and Elizabeth Bennet are on the verge of matrimony, Lady Catherine visits Elizabeth in order to make her refute this gossip. But in carrying back to her nephew an account of Elizabeth's refusal to deny the report, Lady Catherine unwittingly makes her own gossip the catalyst for Mr. Darcy's second and successful proposal.

In addition, however "tender" and "complete" their *éclaircissement*, it is followed by Elizabeth's concerns about the vulgarity of the treatment that Mr. Darcy receives from her neighbor Sir William Lucas and from her mother, Mr. Collins, and Mrs. Philips. As the narrator suggests, "though the uncomfortable feelings arising from all this took from the season of courtship much of its pleasure, it added to the hope of the future; and she looked forward with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley" (2:384). The narrator also provides a synopsis of their postdenouement married life in which the "pleasures" of Pemberley are frequently interrupted. The insincere Miss Bingley and the condescending Lady Catherine make visits. Lydia repeatedly sends requests for money and comes to stay when her husband goes off to London or Bath. Mr. Bennet, too, though beloved, keeps showing up unexpectedly at Pemberley.

But these details, though they are undermining, work only to soften the implausibility of the closure. "A rebellion against the dictates of love-plotting in the name of greater fictional realism," as critic Joseph Boone has suggested, "does not necessarily guarantee a radical move against the love-plot's conservative sexual ideology."36 By describing, however briefly, Elizabeth and Darcy's discomforts before and after
marrying, the narrative strives for greater verisimilitude against the all-too-neat convention of happy endings. While deflating details may correct the illusion of perfection in marriage, they do not undercut the desirability of the heroine's fate, nor do they make that fate seem less hierarchical. The narrator lodges with the heroine, for example, awareness of the discomforts belonging to "the season of courtship." Elizabeth tries to "shield" Mr. Darcy from her vulgar neighbors and relatives; she is "ever anxious" about their contacts with him. The society of home and neighborhood is "so little pleasing to either," but she is displeased because he is (2:384).

In addition to endorsing marriage as a patriarchal institution, *Pride and Prejudice*'s plot resolution confirms that Elizabeth Bennet's "impertinence," rather than being part of a collective response to a social situation, is unique to her personality. Because it is unique, the heroine's feisty talk has made her lovable. This point is articulated toward the close of the novel when Elizabeth explains to Mr. Darcy why he fell in love with her. The rarity of assertiveness in a young, marriageable woman has attracted him, she insists. Although she assumes again a mockingly dominant role, the novel never casts doubt on the account she offers:

"Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?"

"For the liveliness of your mind, I did."

"You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less. The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike them." (2:380)

If the comic resolution makes Elizabeth Bennet's impertinence lovable because it is unique, the ending also makes it unique because it is lovable. Although other women in the novel view Mr. Darcy as a desirable mate, he is attracted to Elizabeth only. *Pride and Prejudice* heightens the heroine's individuality, by making her Mr. Darcy's sole choice. During the course of the novel his passion for her is frequently in evidence—in his blushes, silences, absentmindedness, "odd unconnected questions" (2:182), and, most commonly, his stares. Indeed, passion is registered in his very presence—in his frequent, surprising appearances wherever she may be: at Rosings, at her cousin's parsonage, at Pemberley, in the town of Lambton, at Longbourne. These signs point toward and culminate in the plot resolution which, with Elizabeth's marriage to Mr. Darcy, asserts her singularity.

The assertion is striking because while it too suppresses the collec-
tive source for the heroine's "female voice," such suppression is not necessary. Austen's representation of female friendship in the novel in itself effectively mutes the subversive aspects of her women's culture. *Pride and Prejudice* can be said not just to draw on but also to exploit the comic plot's focus on an individual woman and her union with a suitor in the interest of denying potentially disruptive female bonds. The resolution's gratuitous emphasis on individuality, combined with its rendering of the pleasures, however imperfect, of marriage, thus makes for a more emphatic endorsement of patriarchal values than either *Lady Susan* or *The Watsons* evinces.

It should be clear by now that I do not think we can find the explanation for this difference between the middle works and *Pride and Prejudice* in Austen's personal experience. Such an account would depend on a comparison of her life when writing *Lady Susan* and *The Watsons* to her experience while living at Chawton, during which time she revised and published *Pride and Prejudice*. Although her female circle at Chawton fostered her writing, she may, as some feminist critics have suggested, nonetheless have felt discontented with her all-female household and blamed her female housemates, ironically, for making it possible for her to choose celibacy.37 But her letters from the second decade of the nineteenth century, as I have shown, suggest, on the contrary, that she was satisfied with the choice she had made and continued to cherish intimacies with a few female friends and kin.

The difference can be attributed more persuasively to Austen's shift from private to public writing. I have suggested that Austen's middle works, in both representing strong female bonds and seeking to offset or muffle them, inscribe Austen's ambivalence, her genuinely divided loyalties. *Pride and Prejudice*, while showing traces of her attachment to two cultures, evinces less ambivalence, less conflict over her cultural commitments. In writing for publication, Austen had a strong sense of her audience. Her six novels assume readers familiar with the many novel conventions to which she alluded in subtle and occasionally overt revisions of them. Her novels also assume a public readership with patriarchal values. For that audience, we can assume, she muted the most subversive signs of her women's culture.

*Pride and Prejudice* also works to suppress evidence of her conflicting loyalties in order to avoid representing contradictions. Some critics have recently called attention to the novel as an ideological act, which seeks through formal means to resolve social contradictions.38 But we need not implicitly transfer all agency to the genre itself or view Austen as only the unconscious medium of ideology. Austen knew that her perceptions and values were at times in opposition, and,
as an exponent of organic form, she would have sought to avoid (unself-reflexive) renderings not only of ridiculously incompatible novel conventions but also of overtly conflicting cultural perspectives. Haste, spontaneity, and contradiction were conventions of the genre of private letters, in which women communicated with one another; the novel, as Austen was constructing it, did not share these conventions. It did not endorse the forms of that verisimilitude.

Still, in her efforts to defer to the expectations of a public readership and to construct an apparently nondiscordant or seamless fiction, Austen need not have so enthusiastically celebrated the relationship of hero and heroine. She curtailed her portrait of the women’s culture in this novel much more than in *Lady Susan* and *The Watsons*. Moreover, she amplified the hierarchical and heterosexual bond that closes the published work. Austen made it particularly attractive by emphasizing the desirability of the hero—his wealth, family connections, good looks, and estimable character—and the gratifications of his passionate and unwavering desire for, his “heart-felt delight” in, Elizabeth (2:366). Because feminist critics have had difficulty coming to terms with this compelling portrait of patriarchal marriage, their responses will help us to see the limitations of perceiving the novel through the lens of American feminist criticism.

The difficulty lies in the asymmetrical duality at the heart of this critical tradition. I have already described two positions within feminist criticism that make for unequal binary oppositions. One position gives more power to the female voice than to oppressive patriarchal ideologies; the other tilts the balance in the opposite direction. But though they differ on the issue of power, both positions agree on and enact another more crucial inequality: whatever power they ascribe to the female voice, both value it more. Feminist critics generally not only locate the “female voice” in literature by women; they prize that voice over other expressions in a literary work, consciously reversing the particular hierarchy of value that has given to the male priority over the female. In addition, the female voice is often not as apparent in the text as are patriarchal values, or, if overt, it has nevertheless gone undetected. Because feminist critics generally enact the discovery of an obscured female voice, they tend to understand that voice to be more meaningful or “real” than the views and values that the text makes particularly accessible and that critics’ social ideologies have hitherto made recognizable.39

The discovery process implicit in feminist criticism works well, when we seek in Austen’s novels evidence of her women’s culture. The fit between the criticism and Austen’s literary representations is fairly
close in these instances, and it doesn’t matter whether one views the identity generated by the women’s culture as naturally female or, as I have suggested, as a social construction. But feminist criticism has difficulty in confronting particularly ebullient expressions of the gentry’s culture in Jane Austen’s novels. It is suspicious of appearances: could the woman writer really mean to endorse dominant, conventional values? Surely, they are merely the surface sheet of the palimpsest. Her more genuine sentiments are, so we are urged to assume, tucked away under or within the text’s patriarchal appearance. Alternatively, the critic, supposing that the woman writer did really intend allegiance to the gentry’s culture, disapproves of a loyalty not in her own interests (since the ideology she represented prescribed her subordination). The critic uses evidence of the woman writer’s allegiance to a patriarchal ideology to call attention to the power of the dominant culture’s ideology to mystify and harm women. Feminist criticism thus tends either to trivialize Austen’s commitment to her more dominant culture or to translate it into a version of false consciousness.

Can reading Austen’s work with the framework of her two cultures avoid these same limitations? After all, the concept also has its origins in feminist scholarship, though in the work of historians of American women. It, too, relies on an asymmetricality, placing more value on the women’s than on the gentry’s culture. But the framework’s duality of cultures, because of a subtle difference from feminist criticism’s duality of female voice/dominant ideology, bears the potential for perceiving in another way Austen’s enthusiastic textual endorsements of patriarchal values.

The binary opposition of feminist criticism isolates gender—the female voice, view, or experience—from other aspects of social identity and experience. But the framework of women’s and gentry’s cultures, while highlighting the conflicts between these cultures, also situates one within the other. It thus calls attention to the inextricable connection between gender and other features of experience, particularly social rank, for Austen and her female friends and kin. To say that Austen and her circle identified themselves by gender and social rank is insufficient. If the gentry’s culture produced gender as a high status identity—“genteel femininity”—the women’s culture’s construction of female identity, though partly in opposition, was also circumscribed by status concerns drawn from the gentry’s culture. These concerns, as we have seen, limit Elizabeth Bennet’s awareness of and anger over female subordination to the community of genteel persons just as they prevent a more devastating, more radical portrait of male domination across social ranks.

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The framework of cultural duality, then, may enable us to recognize Austen and her female circle's dependence on and perceived need for the gentry's culture, as a feminist criticism oblivious to social rank or class as aspects of female identity cannot. The framework may enable us to appreciate that, whether or not we admire the gentry's culture, it was in their interests not as women but as gentlewomen in a hierarchical society to identify with and prize that culture. It may also enable us to see that, when writing for publication, Austen at times could downplay conflicting representations of her two cultures with strong and sincere endorsements of the gentry's dominant culture and not only out of concern for her public's expectations or seamless representations. She could and would want to do so in her public work because the women's culture was, paradoxically, not just "against" but "within" the gentry's patriarchal culture.

The framework may make it possible for us to do these things, that is, if we are prepared to acknowledge that Austen's Pride and Prejudice is not always and everywhere subtly, obliquely subversive. Literary critical approaches function in part to make the writer and his or her work familiar because cast in terms recognizable to a contemporary community of readers. Pride and Prejudice does fit the familiarizing paradigm of feminist criticism, but not completely. And what of Austen's other novels? Although it is not possible to examine them here, I want to offer a few generalizations about what we can expect to find when approaching them within the framework of cultural duality.

Like Pride and Prejudice, the other novels published between 1811 and 1818 express and simultaneously restrain a perspective drawn from Austen's women's culture. Like Pride and Prejudice, they do so only sometimes, for these works also intermittently advocate, without destabilizing qualifications, the patriarchal perspective of the gentry's culture. In these ways Pride and Prejudice is representative of Austen's other published fictions. It differs, however, as all the novels do one from another, in the way it combines these varying representations.

Whereas Austen turned to her women's culture for her representation of Elizabeth Bennet and then obfuscated the source and subversiveness of that culture in her depictions of Pride and Prejudice's female friends, the characterizations of some of the other novels' heroines bear no influence of the women's culture. Austen's comments about her female protagonists reveal her awareness of their diversity. Although she knew that her niece Fanny Knight and cousin Mary Cooke and some other female friends and kin preferred model heroines, "pictures of perfection," as she was to assure Fanny in 1817, "make me sick &
Because her own tastes differed from those of some in her female circle, she believed, as her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh attests in his memoir of the novelist, that the outspoken, playful Emma Woodhouse was “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.” Persuasion’s quiet, somber Anne Elliot she viewed quite differently, informing her niece Fanny, “You may perhaps like the Heroine, as she is almost too good for me.”

Unlike Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, which was published just after it, depicts a heroine untouched by Austen’s women’s culture; moreover, it provides an extended representation of a didactic female friendship, an unambiguous move that, like the ending of Pride and Prejudice, gratuitously champions the patriarchal values of the gentry’s culture. The narrative shows Fanny Price, while at Portsmouth, introducing her younger sister to the habit of reading and study and helping her to manage her bad temper. This is not a novel in which “we can teach,” as Elizabeth Bennet remarks, “only what is not worth knowing,” although in illustrating and endorsing the didactic function of female friendship, Mansfield Park does also render it plausible by showing the mentor, while teaching her sister self-control, struggling to master her own desire for her cousin Edmund Bertram.

Areas other than the plot resolution can, in Austen’s other novels, convey warm, unambiguous endorsements of patriarchal values. Conversely, the plot resolutions of the other novels may not, as in Pride and Prejudice, express such a strong commitment to those same values, although they all unite the heroines and heroes in marriage. The ending of Northanger Abbey, for example, subtly undercuts the perspective of the gentry’s culture. With its sudden and belated manufacture of a husband for Eleanor Tilney, that novel slyly mocks marriage as the always necessary and all-too-conventional fate for women.

Austen’s six novels express and obscure aspects of the women’s culture, and they unequivocally endorse patriarchal ideology, but they do not offer these differing representations in the same places or in the same proportions from one novel to the next. Pride and Prejudice, then, does not illustrate an exact pattern to which the other novels conform. We may never know the specific reasons for these variations—Austen’s surviving letters from the second decade of the nineteenth century provide few hints. But we do know that the women’s culture’s paradoxical relationship to the gentry’s culture, partly dissenting from and wholly dependent on it, made possible inconsistencies of perspective within the novels and variations among them. Those of us who are feminists need to acknowledge these inconsistencies and variations and, difficult as it may be, relinquish some of our intimacy with
Austen's novels. With an interpretive approach that is both feminist and responsive to Jane Austen's social and cultural contexts, we can expect to find her published works sometimes hospitable and sometimes resistant, sometimes familiar and sometimes strange. The framework of cultural duality makes her six published novels only partially ours.