4. Austen's Tradesmen: Improving Masculinity in Pride and Prejudice

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CHAPTER 4

Austen’s Tradesmen

Improving Masculinity in
Pride and Prejudice

While the novels of Austen’s contemporaries, with very few exceptions, are given over to crises of social and marital disintegration, Pride and Prejudice is a categorically happy novel, and its felicity is not merely incidental, something that happens at the end of a novel, but is rather at once its premise and its prize. In its readiness to ratify and to grant our happiness, Pride and Prejudice is almost shamelessly wish fulfilling. The fantasies it satisfies, however, are not merely private—a poor but deserving girl catches a rich husband. They are pervasively political as well. (Johnson, Jane Austen 73)

[A] relationship with the self . . . is not simply “self awareness” but self-formation as an “ethical subject,” a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. (Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure 28)

Much of Pride and Prejudice’s enduring appeal is no doubt due to the reputation of the novel as a “shamelessly” happy story in which, as Johnson notes, the characters realize their dreams (Jane Austen 73).1 This perception, of course, is primarily based upon the romantic account of Elizabeth and Darcy’s love relationship. Elizabeth is one of the more alluring female figures in the history of English letters, and Darcy is admired as both an ancestral man of England and a lover.2 He is a phenomenal male figure, and the heroine sarcastically announces early in the tale that she is “perfectly convinced . . . that Mr. Darcy has no defect” (50). Mrs. Gardiner, however, later explains to Elizabeth that the benevolent patriarch of Pemberley “wants nothing but a little more liveliness, and that, if he marry prudently, his wife may teach him” (288). According to the heroine’s aunt, Darcy must “learn” to overcome his cautious reserve and appreciate the energy of other individuals; and though Austen reveals throughout her corpus how love can destabilize lesser men, the hero of Pride and Prejudice is the exceptional man who benefits from his
amorous experiences. Indeed, he eventually relates to the heroine: “[Y]ou taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception. You shewed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased” (328). Darcy’s love for Elizabeth—a love that is not Deleuzian but ostensibly edifying—helps him to accept his proper social function, and as Johnson concludes, Austen ultimately depicts him as “singularly free from the faults that underline comparable figures elsewhere” (Jane Austen 73). Darcy presides over this shamelessly happy story as an exemplar of English masculinity, and his extraordinary social/sexual subjectivity suggests the lack of any remotely equivalent men.

Darcy’s preeminent class position as the current head of an ancient, landed, yet untitled family immediately distinguishes him from the other men of the novel. In addition, he is an outstanding man because of his ability to satisfy the various and distinct socially produced desires for proper English masculinity generated by the discursive field of the 1790s. He is a physically imposing man who is eager to fish with Mr. Gardiner at Pemberley (235); he can be a coldly rational man, as he demonstrates by his unwillingness to allow Bingley to risk his recent rise in society by embracing an irrational love; and he also exposes great sensibility, as in his second proposal when he “expressed himself . . . as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do” (325). Although he is a versatile man, Austen most clearly portrays Darcy as an adherent to Burke’s model of chivalric masculinity, and as Alistair Duckworth explains, “he has a Burkean regard for the wisdom of his ancestors” (129). Darcy carefully follows Burke’s outline for a man of ancestral heritage; he is noble, well mannered, and upholds the majesty and tradition of his Pemberley estate that symbolizes his aristocratic lineage and grounds his cultural authority. His outstanding social/sexual standing, buttressed by the grandeur of Pemberley, allows him to serve as an administrator of social morality who effectively orchestrates and evaluates the activity of the novel. Darcy’s exceptional status as a disciplined man who is virile yet genteel, romantic yet responsible, anticipates both the impending collapse of idealized Burkean masculinity and an important cultural shift in England’s expectations for its male leaders.

Austen’s mature novels suggest that the post-Revolutionary English nation can no longer rely solely upon Burkean aristocratic men like Darcy to provide civic and moral guidance; as Mansfield Park, Emma, and Persuasion illustrate, country gentlemen are aging, and the noble ideals they once embodied are quickly atrophying. While this decline of the aristocratic man and his Burkean principles is not apparent in Pride and Prejudice, Austen’s novel does accentuate Darcy’s singular status, and his marriage to Eliza-
beth effectively ensures that the next generation’s Mr. Darcy will lack true aristocratic lineage. There are simply no other men of Darcy’s standing or grandeur in the narrative, and in her later tales Austen portrays the decay of Burkean masculinity quite clearly. In the latter half of the novelist’s corpus, she demonstrates that the modernizing nation will not be guided solely by men of the aristocracy, and as we begin to see in *Pride and Prejudice*, England must prepare for and expect important civic activity from its rising trade class that Mary Evans and other Austen scholars have observed in her novels. Evans notes that Austen’s texts dramatize how in the early 1800s “a largely rural world of agricultural production gave way . . . to an urban world of mechanized industrial production” (3–4). *Pride and Prejudice* specifically portrays two men, affiliated with the trade class that emerges from this urban industrial growth, who attempt to improve themselves and enhance their responsibilities in the modern English state: Mr. Bingley and Mr. Gardiner.

Gardiner is a successful and respected man of trade, and while Bingley is not himself a member of the trade class, his descent from a prosperous family of trade continues to mark him throughout the novel; he may no longer work, but he is still defined as a man from trade. Neither Bingley nor Gardiner enjoys the status and power of Darcy, but Bingley has substantial financial means, and Gardiner displays a genteel Burkean demeanor usually reserved for a nobleman. They cannot become complete men like Darcy, but they are able to ameliorate their sexualized aesthetics of existence. Foucault explains that the ancient Greek practice of molding an aesthetic of existence did not entail “the individual . . . [making] himself into an ethical subject by universalizing the principles that informed his action; on the contrary, he did so by means of an attitude and a quest that individualized his action [and] modulated it” (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2 62). Bingley and Gardiner must create individualized rather than idealized social/sexual subjectivities by focusing on specific anxieties and needs that will enable them to enlarge their roles and responsibilities in their social communities: Bingley orders his aesthetic of existence around the pursuit of pleasure, while Gardiner organizes his around a sense of duty. These men of/from trade do not threaten to usurp Darcy’s role as a civic and moral administrator, but as successful members of England’s emerging middle classes, Gardiner and Bingley embody what Ernest Gellner dubs the “idea of progress” that “European thought since the eighteenth century has come to assume” (3). Gellner explains that following the French Revolution, “Life has come to be lived on an upward slope. The nature of things has a bias towards improvement. Improvement is both anticipated and required” (4). Bingley and Gardiner’s social advancements help them to become more involved in early-nineteenth-century English
society, but their class positions ultimately prevent them from joining or intimately participating in the nation’s ancient history.

While *Emma* and *Persuasion* offer more poignant portraits of a newly emerging class structure and the decaying aristocracy, *Pride and Prejudice* dramatizes how England and its ancestral leaders are beginning to recognize the social potential of new classes of men, represented by Bingley and Gardiner, who have either wealth or a sense of duty—but not both. Indeed, Darcy’s close relationship with Bingley suggests that the gap between new and old money is shrinking, and the hero’s kindness and collaboration with Gardiner demonstrate an astonishing degree of cooperation between the aristocracy and the tradesmen of London. Darcy, like his arrogant aunt, is certainly not interested in abandoning his ancestral privilege. Austen’s novel makes explicit his extant preeminence as an English male, but the hero’s relationships with these men of/from trade illustrate an important transition in the nation’s conceptions of class and masculinity. To ensure that the increasing involvement of this new-money class is properly regulated, even men of/from trade must be taught traditional modes of English maleness and trained to make appropriate contributions to the state. Men like Bingley and Gardiner are not expected (or allowed) to become established cultural leaders, but Austen’s narrative documents their increasingly prominent role in the civic community. They improve themselves and expand their social roles, but their historical class status permits them to become only apprentices and assistants of Darcy—not his partners in guiding the moral and social development of the national community. Ernest Renan, in his canonical “What Is a Nation?,” points out that “a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of [this] heritage” (52). Austen’s tradesmen actively engage the events of the present national community, and their prosperity facilitates their personal enrichment, but they do not and cannot share the aristocratic historical tradition of England that is romanticized by Burke and personified by Darcy. Their status as men of trade, whose money was recently earned rather than ancestrally inherited, prevents them from fully joining the mythologized English national heritage. They are improving, and as they improve they become more valuable to the present and future of the state, yet they always already exist as historically inferior men because of their class.

Bingley is introduced long before the appearance of Gardiner, and we soon learn that the former has both ample financial resources and a definite plan for social improvement. As a poster child for the successes of the trade
class, he embodies the great economic potential of this segment of society. And Austen’s text reveals a strong cultural anxiety about him—especially his penchant for destabilizing love relationships. Even a landed aristocratic man like Darcy is concerned with the development of this newly wealthy man; Austen’s hero both tutors Bingley in Burke’s model of traditional male behavior and encourages him to discipline his amorous desires. The novel documents the pressures and difficulties Bingley experiences as he attempts to meet the desires produced by Burke and other post-Revolutionary writers for proper English masculinity. Austen’s portrayal of Bingley thus also instructs other prosperous men, who have recently emerged from the trade class, of the lessons they must learn to become integral participants in the national community. Bingley is “a young man of large fortune from the north of England”; he is “gentlemanlike” and has “a pleasant countenance, and easy, and unaffected manners,” but his money is both earned and new (1; 7). Like many ascendants from the rising trade class, he has significant monetary holdings, but Austen exposes early in the novel that he is still quite inferior to the administrator of the Pemberley estate. She relates that Darcy “was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley” and that “in understanding Darcy was the superior” (8; 13). Bingley is a compelling figure because he approaches the masculine excellence upheld by Darcy. He occupies a new position in the social hierarchy somewhere above the trade class and below the gentry, and this precarious space severely complicates his social/sexual subjectivity. John McAleer explains that Bingley’s family is “passing from the middle class into the gentry,” and “they exhibit the uneasiness such a transition involves” (73).

Bingley is expected to continue his family’s social rise, and Austen’s text details his struggles to accomplish this task while performing as a lover.

Bingley, like Gardiner, must specifically learn to act as a Burkean man of England to gain acceptance as an appropriate male figure and potential future leader. As an exemplar of Burke’s ideal of English masculinity, Darcy remains an especially important influence on Bingley, and this man of new money knows that his efforts for self-improvement largely depend upon his ability to follow the model of maleness offered by the administrator of Pemberley. Bingley playfully asserts that “if Darcy were not such a great tall fellow, in comparison with myself, I should not pay him half so much deference” but then quickly admits that he does “not know a more aweful object than Darcy” (44). Bingley’s remarks on the awe-inspiring quality of his friend foreground the influence of the hero on the “inferior” men of the story; but while Bingley knows he must learn from the example set by Darcy, he is also conscious of his shortcomings as a man from trade. Austen notes that “Mr. Bingley inherited property to the amount of nearly an hundred thousand
pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it” (12). It is now Bingley’s responsibility to enshrine the family’s new cultural position, yet he knows he cannot simply copy the architectural drawings for the Darcys’ residence. When Bingley’s sister encourages him to model his future estate after Pemberley, he answers that he “will buy Pemberley itself if Darcy will sell it” and explains to his sibling that it would be “more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by imitation” (33). Bingley recognizes his own limitations and his own potential; he realizes that he could never fully pattern his future home after the ancestral Pemberley because he lacks the heritage of the Darcys. Bingley’s comments also remind us of his significant cash holdings; if Darcy’s grand estate were somehow for sale, Bingley theoretically could buy it. Unlike Darcy who maintains proud connections to the history of a specific domestic realm, Bingley is a man of the present, who acknowledges that “whatever I do is done in a hurry . . . and therefore if I should resolve to quit Netherfield, I should probably be off in five minutes” (36). He informs Mrs. Bennet that “when I am in the country . . . I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either” (37). Bingley is neither personally nor financially tied to a specific domestic domain; he and his income are mobile. While he understands that his continued advancement will require him to acquire an estate, he knows that such a purchase could only simulate a home like Pemberley.

Bingley certainly respects Pemberley and the ancestral legacy that Darcy’s family estate symbolizes, but Bingley’s attempts to improve his social/sexual subjectivity inevitably revolve around his primary concern: the pursuit of pleasure. Darcy may be unimpressed by the Meryton ball, but Bingley informs his friend, “I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life, as I have this evening; and there are several of them you see uncommonly pretty” (9). Bingley is a pleasure seeker who enjoys social events, especially interactions with attractive women, and his acquired wealth allows him to fulfill such desires. He becomes particularly interested in Jane, and Austen reports that while he housed her at Netherfield during her illness, “his anxiety for Jane was evident, and his attentions to herself most pleasing” (30). Bingley even experiences pleasure in caring for Miss Bennet, and when she is finally ready to leave her bed at Netherfield, he “was full of joy and attention. The first half hour was spent in piling up the fire, lest she should suffer from the change of room” (47). Bingley also maintains his fondness for dancing and remains committed to his plan to host a ball at Netherfield. When his sister challenges his idea for a ball by announcing that there are “some among us to whom a ball would be rather a punishment than a pleasure,” he declares, “If you mean Darcy . . . he may go to bed, if he chuses, before it begins.” Bingley
momentarily dismisses the example of Darcy’s tastes, and after Miss Bingley counters by suggesting that “[i]t would surely be more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day,” her brother explains, “Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say but it would not be near so much like a ball” (48). Early in the novel, Austen emphasizes Bingley’s pursuit of pleasures—even irrational pleasures—but she later dramatizes how Darcy instructs his understudy to manage such volatile enjoyment.¹⁰

Following Bingley’s privately sponsored ball, Austen relates that “[he] was all grateful pleasure” to accept an invitation to dine with the Bennets. He is unable to make this proposed meeting because his training in Burkean male behavior begins to take precedence over his preference for pleasure (93). Miss Bingley informs Jane that “the whole party have left Netherfield by this time, and are on their way to town; and without any intention of coming back again” (105). This regrettable news invites us to speculate on Darcy’s hegemonic direction of Bingley’s activity. Although Elizabeth is certain that Bingley is not acting on his own volition, Jane insists that his removal to London “must be his own doing.—He is his own master” (106). Jane is often dismissed as a simpleton, but she clearly understands Bingley’s responsibility to focus his own aesthetic of existence; she upholds the power of the successful bourgeois subject to mold his own position in the modernizing national community. Elizabeth, however, is certain that Bingley “was really fond of Jane . . . and much as she had always been disposed to like him, she could not think without anger, hardly without contempt, on that easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends, and led him to sacrifice his own happiness to the caprice of their inclinations” (119). Elizabeth identifies what she understands to be Bingley’s weakness, that is, his ductility, and the heroine charges him with becoming too susceptible to the dictates of others, especially Darcy. According to the heroine, the same easiness of temper that enables Bingley to excel as an amiable entertainer is also the primary reason for his inability to pursue his own desires. Darcy certainly sways Bingley’s plans, but the latter’s impressibility should not be read only as an indication of his utter inferiority. Bingley’s significant monetary holdings facilitate his social improvement and his pursuit of pleasure, yet he knows his wealth is not ancestral; hence, he must establish a hegemonic social/sexual identity and learn Burkean masculinity to solidify his new class position in the nation—and Darcy is still the best teacher around.

We discover more about the powerful social forces that influence Bingley and his desires from Elizabeth’s conversations with Darcy during her visit to Hunsford. Indeed, as befits Bingley’s deference, we hear far more about Bingley’s actions from others than we do from himself. When the heroine
asks Darcy if “Mr. Bingley has not much idea of ever returning to Netherfield again?” the hero responds, “I have never heard him say so; but it is probable that he may spend very little of his time there in future. He has many friends, and he is at a time of life when friends and engagements are continually increasing” (158). Darcy highlights the demanding quality of Bingley’s dynamic class position; at this unstable point of his life, as he assumes new cultural identities and responsibilities, he must consider the heightened importance of his business acquaintances, personal relations, and social engagements. Colonel Fitzwilliam Darcy also speaks with Elizabeth about the insecure tradesman. The Colonel informs the heroine, “I really believe Darcy does take care of [Bingley] in those points where he most wants care. From something that [Darcy] told me in our journey hither, I have reason to think Bingley very much indebted to him” (164). Darcy is an active sponsor of Bingley who has taken special care to direct the tradesman’s efforts to learn “proper” English masculinity, and Fitzwilliam specifically reports that “[Darcy] congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage, but without mentioning names or any other particulars, and I only suspected it to be Bingley from believing him the kind of young man to get into a scrape of that sort” (165). As Fitzwilliam’s comment indicates, Bingley is known as a man apt to become overly impressed by irrational sensual charms—a man who needs to be reminded of the dangers of love and the powerful social forces that ought to inform an aspiring English man’s behavior. Darcy’s concern for and tutelage of Bingley again suggest the hero’s recognition that wealthy men of trade like Bingley are becoming vital resources in England’s future—and these men must be taught to discipline their passions to ensure their maturation as stable men of the nation.

Bingley’s misguided pursuit of pleasure is, according to Darcy, specifically dangerous to the tradesman’s efforts to improve his masculinity and secure his new social standing. After Elizabeth’s rejection of the hero’s initial proposal, he admits to offering such advice to the pliable Bingley. Darcy tells Elizabeth he has “no wish of denying that [he] did every thing in [his] power to separate [his] friend from [the heroine’s] sister”; Darcy adds that he “had often seen [Bingley] in love before” (170; 175). The hero knows that his aspiring friend is susceptible to the perils of overwhelming amorous passions, and while he acknowledges that he has deceived Bingley by encouraging him to seek alternative ways to safely stylize his sexuality, Darcy firmly believes that what he did “was done for the best” (177). As a wealthy man without a noble family background, Bingley’s reckless pursuit of pleasure is liable to engender a fall in society that would negate his family’s recent rise. Darcy recognizes that such vulnerable men cannot risk the dangers associated with amorous
emotions, and he is specifically anxious about Bingley, whose wealth qualifies him to become a prominent player in the modern post-agrarian state. Following Darcy’s admission of responsibility, the heroine offers a revised assessment of Bingley. She notes that “[Bingley’s] affection was proved to have been sincere, and his conduct cleared of all blame, unless any could attach to the implicitness of his confidence in his friend” (189). Elizabeth may acquit him, but her comments also point to his continued dependence on the example and instructions of Darcy. Bingley yields to Darcy’s authority as a man of national heritage who can provide accurate instructions on how to meet Burke’s qualifications for male civic organizers.

Elizabeth’s awareness of Bingley’s struggle to mold his own sexual subjectivity after Darcy’s powerful example of Burkean masculinity allows her to observe acutely how Bingley’s distinct class position alters his behavior. When she encounters Bingley at Pemberley, she appreciates his “unaffected cordiality with which he expressed himself, on seeing her again,” and Austen notes that he “looked and spoke with the same good-humored ease that he had ever done” (230). In spite of his efforts to become a Burkean man, Bingley speaks and acts without ceremony. He even exposes his extant romantic interest in Miss Bennet when he tells Elizabeth that it “was a very long time since he had had the pleasure of seeing [Jane] . . . it is above eight months. We have not met since the 26th of November, when we were all dancing together at Netherfield” (231). Bingley’s precise memory is an impressive indication of his feelings for Jane, but it is not clear that he is a secure man capable of pursuing his own desires without first clearing his actions with Darcy. We must wait for the re-arrival of Bingley and Darcy in Meryton to identify the integrity and focus of the former’s aesthetic of existence. Bingley is “both pleased and embarrassed” upon his arrival at Longbourn; he once more illustrates his emotional and physical sensitivity by remaining susceptible to the potency of amorous experiences (297). Elizabeth even records “how much the beauty of her sister re-kindled the admiration of her former lover. When first he came in, he had spoken to her but little; but every five minutes seemed to be giving her more of his attention” (299). Bingley is still animated by and pleased with Jane, who now declares that “he is blessed with greater sweetness of address, and a stronger desire of generally pleasing than any other man” (304). Bingley is obsessed with pleasing—pleasing Jane, pleasing Darcy, and even pleasing the annoying Mrs. Bennet—and he has likewise become a very skilled seeker of pleasure, but while pursuing pleasure permits him to improve his social/sexual subjectivity, this focus for his aesthetic of existence will not enable him to fulfill Burke’s desire for a chivalric male who can provide civic and moral leadership.

Bingley’s wealth, nevertheless, does allow him to establish a stable social/
sexual identity based upon the pursuit of pleasure. After the announcement of the engagement between Bingley and Jane, Elizabeth reflects upon their future marriage. Austen narrates, “in spite of his being a lover, Elizabeth really believed all his expectations of felicity, to be rationally founded, because they had for basis the excellent understanding, and super-excellent disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself” (308). Elizabeth, like Darcy, is concerned about Bingley’s proclivity to love unreasonably, but she logically forecasts a life of contentment for the couple because of their mutual tastes and tempers; they are both unassuming individuals who simply want to enjoy pleasure. Bingley has consistently demonstrated his tendency to comply with the commands of others, and as we soon learn, even his return to Netherfield was authorized by Darcy, who advises Elizabeth that

Bingley is most unaffectedly modest. His diffidence had prevented his depending on his own judgment in so anxious a case, but his reliance on mine, made everything easy. I was obliged to confess one thing, which for a time, and not unjustly, offended him. I could not allow myself to conceal that your sister had been in town three months last winter, and that I had known it, and purposely kept it from him. He was angry. But his anger, I am persuaded, lasted no longer than he remained in any doubt of your sister’s sentiments. He has heartily forgiven me now. (330)

Darcy’s “confession” indicates his continued influence on the diffident Bingley. Darcy finally accepts that while Bingley’s money makes him an eligible man to assume a greater role in the leadership of England, he is simply not capable of regulating his pursuit of pleasure, even if such discipline could enhance or even ensure his role in the future nation.

Bingley cannot achieve the masculine excellence of Darcy, but Austen’s aspiring man from trade has certainly come a long way, and he and Jane will now leave Meryton to seek their pleasure. Austen relates that “Mr. Bingley and Jane remained at Netherfield only a twelvemonth. . . . The darling wish of his sisters was then gratified; he bought an estate in a neighbouring county to Derbyshire, and Jane and Elizabeth, in addition to every other source of happiness, were within thirty miles of each other” (342). Bingley finally attains the all-important estate that grounds him as a landed man of the nation, but this home is purchased and still thirty miles from the splendor of Pemberley. For all Darcy’s influence on his friend, Bingley can only approach the sphere of the remarkable romantic hero. While Bingley’s acquisition of the estate helps to aggrandize his aesthetic of existence, he remains socially and sexually inferior to Darcy. Bingley has tried to learn from Darcy
throughout the narrative, but he is ultimately a man of new money—derived from trade—who is enamored of pleasure rather than cultural prestige. His relationship with Jane is not Deleuzian, but it may anticipate a new telos for romantic male behavior; his love for Jane promotes his pleasure rather than his social/sexual stability. Bingley must depend upon his money instead of his marriage or lineage to form his hegemonic identity, and though his grand residence materially marks him as a nationally prominent man, he uses his financial resources to pursue pleasure rather than the discipline of Burkean masculinity. Bingley exists as an ersatz gentleman without an ancestral heritage; still Austen’s novel demonstrates a strong social interest in training such men in the traditional modes of English masculinity. Bingley’s is not a complete success story, but it does offer a blueprint for other thriving men of new money to follow.

Mr. Gardiner is such a prosperous man of trade, but since he has not inherited significant wealth he does not have the financial resources that Bingley uses to pursue extensive material pleasures and purchase an estate. Despite his lack of ready cash, he is a responsible man who acts as a dutiful Burkean guardian for the Bennet family. The narrator presents Gardiner as a happily married older tradesman who has trained his amorous desires; he is neither a cherished romantic love figure like Darcy nor an ambitious seeker of sensual pleasure like Bingley. Austen initially mentions Gardiner as Mrs. Bennet’s “brother settled in London in a respectable line of trade” (23). As an urbanite, he is a rarity in Austen’s fiction, yet the narrator notes that he is also “a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister as well by nature as education.” Indeed, Austen claims that “the Netherfield ladies would have had difficulty believing that a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses, could have been so well bred and agreeable” (124–25). Gardiner is an impressive male figure who, despite his class standing, appears to fulfill Burke’s expectation for well-mannered masculinity. Gardiner does not receive Darcy’s direct tutoring; nevertheless, he still attempts to perform many of the duties prescribed by Burke for proper English men (75). Indeed, Gardiner displays many of the attributes required of a Burkean man, save the requisite ancestral standing and class status. While Gardiner does not become a prominent figure until late in the novel, Austen draws specific attention to his classed identity near the end of the second volume. As Elizabeth awaits a planned tour of the Lake District with her aunt and uncle, the narrator informs us that “Mr. Gardiner would be prevented by business from setting out till a fortnight later in July, and must be in London again within a month; and as that left too short a period for them to go so far . . . they were obliged to give up the Lakes” (211–12). These comments emphasize the restrictions Gardiner experiences because of
his business obligations. Like Bingley, Gardiner has commitments that force him to adjust his social activities and modify his aesthetic of existence.

The shorter alternative holiday through Derbyshire, on which the Gardiners are joined by the heroine, highlights the tradesman’s social grace and personal versatility. The most important events of this journey are, of course, the travelers’ visits to Pemberley. Austen notes Mr. Gardiner’s “willingness” to view Darcy’s landed estate, and she reports that his “manners were easy and pleasant” in his discussions with the nostalgic housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, who perpetually praises the hero (213; 218). Gardiner is polite, well mannered, and amenable to a doting caretaker, remaining “highly amused by the kind of family prejudice, to which he attributed her excessive commendation of her master” (219). He is not offended by Mrs. Reynolds’s lavish admiration of Darcy; rather, he adopts Burke’s theory of ancestral privilege and accepts that it is natural for servants to admire their masters. While at Pemberley, Gardiner also reveals his skill as an outdoorsman, and we are told that “though seldom able to indulge the taste, [Mr. Gardiner] was very fond of fishing” (223). Mr. Darcy offers Gardiner free license to fish on the grounds of Pemberley, and after originally opting not to accept this invitation, the tradesman soon joins Darcy and others in a fishing party “at Pemberley by noon” (235). Mrs. Gardiner speaks of her husband as a man “who was fond of society,” and his behavior at Pemberley illustrates his comfort with different classed domains and distinct modes of culturally approved masculine activity (232). He is a flexible man, but his economic situation eventually disqualifies him from becoming either a true Burkean man or a leader in the modern nation.

Gardiner nonetheless attempts to perform as a heroicBurkean figure following the shocking news of Lydia’s elopement by providing familial leadership and attempting to restore order. In the subsequent London scenes, Austen portrays Gardiner’s ability to rehearse traditional chivalric duties and reveals his inability to match Darcy’s model of Burkean masculinity. Immediately after Elizabeth’s explanation of the events surrounding Lydia’s affair, “Mr. Gardiner readily promised every assistance in his power” (247). He offers his services like a sacrificial hero, and his relatives understand him as such an altruistic man. Jane even assures herself, “now that my dear uncle is come, I hope every thing will be well” (252). As an urban resident, Gardiner is especially helpful in the mission to locate Lydia, and upon arriving at Longbourn, he provides “general assurances of his affection for [Mrs. Bennet] and all her family, [and] told her that he meant to be in London the very next day” to “assist Mr. Bennet in every endeavour for recovering Lydia.” He also tries to calm his relatives by reminding them “not [to] give way to useless alarm . . . though it is right to be prepared for the worst, there is no
occasion to look on it as certain” (253). Mr. Gardiner is given and willingly performs the role of family champion who will structure chaos and ensure domestic peace. In addition, he encourages his family to be reasonable. Prior to beginning his quest to save Lydia and comfort his family, Gardiner pledges to “prevail on Mr. Bennet to return to Longbourn, as soon as he could, to the great consolation of his sister, who considered it as the only security for her husband’s not being killed in a duel” (259). Austen’s comment again reminds us of Mr. Gardiner’s graciousness. He has the impressive ability to endure Mrs. Bennet’s excessively irrational fears about her husband’s activity in London with poise. Although he adopts features of a heroic male, he is still a business man, and this class status encourages him to act pragmatically.

Mr. Gardiner demonstrates his new responsibilities by laboring arduously to locate Lydia in London, but while Austen presents him as a familial guardian she also emphasizes how he continues to think and act as a tradesman. He sends Mr. Bennet home, and Gardiner soon writes his brother-in-law to inform him that “after you left me on Saturday, I was fortunate enough to find out in what part of London they were” (266). He breaks the news that Lydia and Wickham are “not married,” but he instructs Mr. Bennet that if he is “willing to perform the engagements which I have ventured to make on your side, I hope it will not be long before they are” (267). Mr. Gardiner appears as a master detective and an effective matchmaker. He has both found the missing lovers and arranged a workable scenario for them to wed. His experience in trade again serves him well; it allows him to negotiate a deal that will benefit all parties and mitigate potential consequences. Gardiner cannot completely mend the damage that the improper actions of Lydia and Wickham have caused, but he does provide a feasible solution that minimizes additional injury. We learn from Mrs. Gardiner and others that Wickham has incurred a large financial debt that must be paid prior to his marrying Lydia, and Mr. Gardiner has apparently made arrangements to settle this financial matter. Gardiner’s involvement in Lydia and Wickham’s elopement even includes a ceremonial function in his niece’s marriage. Lydia, upon her return to Longbourn, tells her sisters that her uncle was to give her away at her wedding, but he “was called away upon business to that horrid Mr. Stone” (282). Lydia’s comment recalls Gardiner’s ubiquitous professional demands that consistently interrupt his other activities, but the youthful Bennet girl’s account also accentuates the tradesman’s inability to perform traditional patriarchal duties such as the offering of a young bride. Although Gardiner rehearsing many of the skills required for Burkean masculinity, his class status and business obligations continually prevent him from fully assuming such a social/sexual identity.

Lydia continues her story by noting that following Mr. Stone’s untimely
request for her uncle’s assistance, she was momentarily frightened that her nuptials must be delayed, but she soon realized that “the wedding need not be put off, for Mr. Darcy might have done as well” (282). Lydia’s remark reminds us of the ever-increasing modern interchangeability of aristocratic men like Darcy and tradesmen like her uncle; Darcy assumes the role of Gardiner, and as Lydia suggests, the administrator of Pemberley is a suitable replacement. Lydia’s report also prompts Elizabeth to inquire of her aunt about the presence of Mr. Darcy at Lydia’s wedding. Mrs. Gardiner’s subsequent letter to Elizabeth provides information regarding the hero’s activity in London and further details on Mr. Gardiner’s attempts to extend his social duties. Mrs. Gardiner specifically narrates the account of Darcy’s arrival at Cheapside and his discussions with Mr. Gardiner. She assures her niece that her “uncle would most readily have settled the whole” of Wickham’s debt, but as she explains, Darcy insisted that “nothing was to be done that he did not do himself” (286). Austen’s language accentuates Darcy’s romantic subjectivity, his great social power, and Gardiner’s classed limitations as a tradesman. He apparently has the available cash to pay Wickham’s substantial obligations, but as Austen shows, Gardiner must defer to Darcy’s authority; while the tradesman is willing to assume the responsibility of the sacrificial heroic figure who can restore order and structure to civilized society, Darcy will not permit a man of trade to play this part. The hero may be interested in promoting the development and improvement of men from the trade class, but he is not yet prepared to relinquish or share the Burkean role of administering civil society and its ethical codes. *Pride and Prejudice* suggests that bourgeois men like Gardiner and newly ascendant men like Bingley are becoming necessary to the maintenance of the English nation, but the novel also illustrates aristocratic men’s desire to preserve their extant privileged status as the curators of England’s moral order.

Mrs. Gardiner closes her letter by telling the heroine that “at last your uncle was forced to yield, and instead of being allowed to be of use to his niece, was forced to put up with only having the probable credit of it” (286). And indeed, when Elizabeth had initially heard of the planned nuptials between Lydia and Wickham, she confidently pronounced, “Oh! it must be my uncle’s doings! Generous, good man, I am afraid he has distressed himself. A small sum could not do all this” (268). The heroine was confident that her uncle had been her family’s benefactor, despite the great financial sacrifice such altruistic actions would have required, and she presented him as a noble man who had miraculously resolved the crisis. Later, however, Mr. Gardiner only offers “intreaties that the subject might never be mentioned to him again” (276). Elizabeth may imagine Mr. Gardiner as a heroic Burkean male, but he knows better than to claim this identity for himself. After Eliza-
beth writes to her uncle to express her appreciation, Mrs. Gardiner indicates to her niece that her “letter . . . gave [Mr. Gardiner] great pleasure, because it required an explanation that would rob him of his borrowed feathers, and give the praise where it was due” (286). He appreciates the heroine’s gratitude, but he is happier to acknowledge who truly saved Lydia and her family from shame. Mr. Gardiner is a man of integrity who is eager to renounce credit for Darcy’s generous actions. Gardiner has raised himself in society by his endeavors in trade, but he is not interested in continuing this rise under false pretenses. Although he does not possess the financial means to operate as an aristocratic male, he organizes his attempts to improve his aesthetic of existence around many of the values upheld by Burke as essential to the proper man of England. At the novel’s close, Austen informs us that “with the Gardiners, [Darcy and Elizabeth] were always on the most intimate terms” (345). The narrator’s concluding comment recalls the comparison between Darcy and Bingley, who are only thirty miles removed from each other. Gardiner is also “close” to the masculine excellence embodied by Darcy and perpetually “visits” this zone of romantic splendor. And while his class status as a respectable tradesman allows him to ameliorate his aesthetic of existence, this same class position prevents him from acting as a public guardian of his community.

Although they fall shy of Darcy’s romantic masculine preeminence, both Gardiner and Bingley manage to improve their sexualized subjectivities by focusing their aesthetics of existence around specific concerns. Neither Bingley nor Gardiner is an extraordinary romantic lover like Darcy, but they consistently attempt to enhance themselves and serve as important examples of the Enlightenment theory of the human potential for improvement developed by Godwin. Godwin explains that “we are all of us endowed with reason, able to compare, to judge and to infer. The improvement therefore, which is to be desired for one, is to be desired for another” (I: 146). Gardiner and Bingley personify this egalitarian mantra as they strive to secure their participation in the dynamic post-Revolutionary English nation. They are ultimately unable to perform all the roles and responsibilities that Burke outlines for a proper man of England, but they are nonetheless impressive male figures whom the nation needs. And yet, despite the social improvement modeled by nouveau riche men like Bingley and tradesmen like Gardiner, Austen’s presentation of Darcy remains an archetype of romantic masculinity. A personal ad in the July 29, 1999, issue of The Stranger, a Seattle-based entertainment newspaper, announced: “Single Irish Female: 27yo blnd/blu 5’10” Irish-Catholic background. Olympia seeks Mr. Darcy. Beach, travel, sports fan, bookstores, autumn, Guinness, leisurely Sunday mornings: all good.” The listing illustrates the continued attractiveness and prominent
versatility of the hero of *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy is still “desired,” and we continue to uphold his financial and social standing as vital features of an idealized man. Bingley and Gardiner will never measure up to this standard of male perfection, but the prominent emergence of the middle classes throughout the nineteenth century forces the modern English state to concern itself with men who are not necessarily ideal. Austen’s novel reflects an important cultural crisis of the post-Revolutionary years: grand men of pure aristocratic ancestry, like the aristocratic tradition itself, are atrophying, and England must now garner important civic contributions from men of/from trade like Bingley and Gardiner—men who have demonstrated great ambition for personal and social improvement. They will never become legendary romantic lovers, and they are not capable of reviving ancestral lines of descent, but they embody a spirit of progress and amelioration that drives the modernization of the English state.