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Reading *Pride and Prejudice*

Abstract
In his "Biographical Notice" of Jane Austen, her brother Henry wrote, "She read aloud with very great taste and effect. Her own works, probably, were never heard to so much advantage as from her own mouth; for she partook largely in all the best gifts of the comic muse."l Henry was not the only witness to praise Austen's skill as a reader, and her pleasure in reading aloud is hinted at by the numerous descriptions of readings in her novels and letters. When the first copy of Pride and Prejudice arrived from the printer, though they had a guest, the Austens "set fairly at it, and read half the first vol. to her." Perhaps Jane was reading that night, for she was certainly happy with the performance. A week later, though, she wrote, "Our second evening's reading to Miss Benn had not pleased me so well, but I believe something must be attributed to my mother's too rapid way of getting on: though she perfectly understands the characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought." A fine reader herself, a frequent one, and one with decided notions of what constitutes excellence, Austen almost certainly wrote her novels anticipating that they would be read aloud. This paper will examine the ways in which the performance practice of reading informs important aspects of Pride and Prejudice.

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Reading *Pride and Prejudice*

Patricia Howell Michaelson

In his "Biographical Notice" of Jane Austen, her brother Henry wrote, "She read aloud with very great taste and effect. Her own works, probably, were never heard to so much advantage as from her own mouth; for she partook largely in all the best gifts of the comic muse."[1] Henry was not the only witness to praise Austen's skill as a reader, and her pleasure in reading aloud is hinted at by the numerous descriptions of readings in her novels and letters. When the first copy of *Pride and Prejudice* arrived from the printer, though they had a guest, the Austens "set fairly at it, and read half the first vol. to her." Perhaps Jane was reading that night, for she was certainly happy with the performance. A week later, though, she wrote, "Our second evening's reading to Miss Benn had not pleased me so well, but I believe something must be attributed to my mother's too rapid way of getting on: though she perfectly understands the characters herself, she cannot speak as they ought."[2] A fine reader herself, a frequent one, and one with decided notions of what constitutes excellence, Austen almost certainly wrote her novels anticipating that they would be read aloud. This paper will examine the ways

1 *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd edition, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), V, 7. References are to this edition.

2 *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 297, 299. This was not the first family reading of *Pride and Prejudice*: Jane had read the first draft of the novel, secretly, to Cassandra. See William Austen-Leigh and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: Her Life and Letters*, 2nd ed. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 73.

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in which the performance practice of reading informs important aspects of *Pride and Prejudice*.[3]

Austen's criticism of her mother's reading reflects concerns that were common in the many contemporary treatises on reading aloud. Since 1748, the publication date of John Mason's *Essay on Elocution, or Pronunciation*, reading aloud had been widely discussed. The early elocutionists directed their remarks at speakers in the senate, the pulpit, and the bar; they argued against the use of artificial "reading tones"—fixed patterns of intonation taught in the schools—and in favour of a more natural reading style that would better express the sense of a text. Other elocutionists devoted attention to the expression not only of sense, but of emotion. An essay by James Burgh, with specific instructions on how to express emotions such as mirth, anger, or denial, was reprinted in many schoolbooks, as were pieces by Mason, James Walker, and Hugh Blair. In fact, most school anthologies were prefaced by instructions for reading aloud.[4] By the end of the eighteenth century, the elocution movement had widened its audience to include virtually any reader.

Austen may have learned about elocution at home. Her father, also considered an excellent reader, was a clergyman, a member of the elocutionists' original target audience; to supplement his income he took in students, and may well have used one of the popular anthologies. Austen herself undoubtedly knew of the elocutionists, for she refers to the elocution movement in *Mansfield Park* (p. 339), in the context of reading in the pulpit. In *Northanger Abbey* (p. 108), she mentions Hugh Blair, in a passage Chapman believes refers to Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783). One of these lectures, "On Pronunciation, or Delivery," was reprinted as an introduction to *Elegant Extracts*, the anthology

3 I borrow the term "performance practice" from musicology, where it "encompass[es] everything about performance that is not unambiguously specified in notation," that is, "the gap between what was notated and what was thought necessary for a performance." See Don Michael Randel, ed., *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 624.

4 William Enfield included his own "Essay on Elocution" as the introduction to his widely used anthology, *The Speaker: or, Miscellaneous Pieces, selected from the Best English Writers ... with a View to Facilitate the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking* (London: Johnson, 1774); other anthologies with instructions on reading include *A Help to Elocution and Eloquence ... designed to form the Minds of Youth to a true Taste in Reading* (London: Bell, 1770); Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Female Reader; or Miscellaneous Pieces ... for the Improvement of Young Women* (London: Johnson, 1789); Lindley Murray, *The English Reader ... Designed to assist young Persons to read with propriety and effect* (York: Longman and Rees, 1799); and many others. The most thorough discussion of the elocution movement is in Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

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read by Mr Martin to his family in *Emma* (p. 29).[5] Blair's comments on reading are by no means original. On the contrary, their very ordinariness will serve to render the characteristics of reading in Jane Austen's day.

Blair asserts that the speaker has two goals, "first, to speak so as to be fully and easily understood by all who hear him; and next, to speak with grace and force, so as to please and to move his audience" (p. viii). For the first goal, he describes four "chief requisites ... a due degree of loudness of voice; distinctness; slowness; and propriety of pronunciation" (p. viii). Volume and articulation are self-evident. What Blair terms "precipitancy of speech" was often criticized (as Austen criticized her mother, above); while it is possible to read at an annoyingly slow pace, "the extreme of speaking too fast is much more common, and requires the more to be guarded against, because, when it has grown up into a habit, few errors are more difficult to be corrected" (p. ix). Under "Propriety of Pronunciation," Blair condemns both regional accents and errors of accentuation. He warns agains overusing accents, as other elocutionists had; Thomas Sheridan, in his *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, had complained that "there are few who either read aloud, or speak in public, that do not transgress this law of accent, by dwelling equally upon different syllables in the same word; such as fór-túne, ná-túre ... &c."[6] Blair's first four subjects thus deal with rather straightforward aspects of correctness in reading.

Blair's next four subjects, "Emphasis, Pauses, Tones, and Gestures," exploit the voice and body to express emotion; more significantly for the study of literature, these elocutionary tools interpret texts. Moreover, while proper articulation, pronunciation, and so on, are implicit in any grammatical text, emphasis, pauses, tones, and gestures may be purposefully indicated by an author, by punctuation or by "stage directions," determining both the reading and the interpretation. Blair uses an

5 Chapman believes that Austen refers to Vicesimus Knox, *Elegant Extracts: or, Useful and Entertaining Pieces of Poetry* (London: Dilly, ca. 1784). Knox also collected the *Elegant Extracts: or, Useful and Entertaining Passages in Prose* (London: Dilly, 1783), which seems equally likely, as Harriet links Mr Martin's reading of *Elegant Extracts* with his reading of novels. In addition, Pamela Cook Miller notes that Austen gave a copy of Knox's prose anthology to her niece Marianne ("Jane Austen and the Power of the Spoken Word," *Persuasions* 7 [1985], 36). Both volumes of *Elegant Extracts* were reprinted many times, but only the prose volume includes Blair's essay. Page references are to *Elegant Extracts ... in Prose*, 2nd ed. (London: Dilly, 1784).

6 Sheridan, *Lectures on the Art of Reading*, reprinted in *Lectures on Elocution, Reading, &c.*, 2 vols (Dublin: Wilde, 1775), I, 69.

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example given in several elocution texts, to indicate how emphasis determines interpretation. Of the question "Do you ride to town to-day," he says, "If it be pronounced thus: Do *you* ride to town to-day? the answer may naturally be, No; I send *my servant* in my stead. If thus; Do you *ride* to town to-day? Answer, No; I intend to *walk*" (p. x), and so on. Blair recommends that the speaker read over his text and rehearse it, marking the "emphatical" words. While he warns against emphasizing too many words, he promises that "On the right management of the emphasis, depends the whole life and spirit of every discourse" (p. x).

Other elocutionists devoted considerable effort to eliciting appropriate emphasis. In his schoolbooks William Scott provided brief examples of antithesis, enumeration, parenthetical remarks, and so on, by which students could practise this art. The Johnsonian prose allows ample opportunity for proper declamation.[7] But in no case is emphasis marked by italics or other punctuation; the student must, as Blair suggested, read the text over and mark it himself. Austen, on the other hand, offered a text in which emphasis is frequently marked—a text that need not be prepared before the reading. Her markings may clarify rhetoric like that exemplified by Scott, such as Darcy's use of antithesis: "Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his *making* friends—whether he may be equally capable of *retaining* them, is less certain" (p. 92). In other cases, her italics indicate shades of meaning that would not be obvious to a performer reading the text for the first time. The very first time Darcy looks at Elizabeth, he says, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me* " (p. 12). A reader who has not prepared this text beforehand would be most likely to stress "tempt," missing the point: Darcy's supposed arrogance. Later on, when Darcy has admitted to another flaw, Elizabeth replies, "*That* is a failing indeed! ... Implacable resentment *is* a shade in a character. But you have chosen your fault well.—I really cannot *laugh* at it" (p. 58). Without such punctuation, the unrehearsed reader would probably place the emphasis elsewhere, especially in the second sentence, with a loss of vigour. Italics indicate emphasis for the silent reader as well, of course, but the absence of them in that case would not threaten the reading to the same degree. While the silent reader may always go over a text twice, the performer should not.

7 Scott, *Lessons in Elocution: Or, a Selection of Pieces in Prose and Verse, for the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking*, 12th ed. (Edinburgh: Fairbairn, Hunter, 1799), pp. 357ff. See also *Beauties of Eminent Writers, Selected and Arranged for the Instruction of Youth in the Proper Reading and Reciting of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Peter Hill, 1797).

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After dealing with emphasis, Blair next considers two sorts of pauses. Most pauses simply "mark the divisions of the sense," and allow the reader to take a breath. But there are also "emphatical pauses ... made, after something has been said of peculiar moment, and on which we want to fix the hearer's attention" (p. xi). Blair warns the reader not to pause strictly according to punctuation, for punctuation often marks grammar, not pronunciation.[8] On the other hand, an author like Austen, planning for unrehearsed oral readings, *could* punctuate the "emphatical pauses." The best example of this in *Pride and Prejudice* is of course the famous opening sentence, on which Austen certainly wants to "fix the hearer's attention," and which is followed by a paragraph break.

By "tones" Blair means not the old-fashioned artificial reading tones, but "that to almost every sentiment we utter, more especially to every strong emotion, nature hath adapted some peculiar tone of voice" (p. xii). He urges the speaker to follow nature in the use of tones. His discussion of gesture, the fourth means of pleasing and moving the audience, is similarly vague. Blair may have been reacting to the extreme specificity of James Burgh's *Art of Speaking*, also reprinted in many schoolbooks, with its list of "Rules for expressing, with propriety, the principal Passions and Humors, which occur in Reading, or public Speaking." Denying, for example, "is expressed by pushing the open right hand from one; and turning the face the contrary way." And, "Malice, or spite, sets the jaws, or gnashes with the teeth; sends blasting flashes from the eyes; draws the mouth toward the ears; clenches both fists, and bends the elbows in a straining manner. The tone of voice and expression are much the same with that of anger; but the pitch not so loud."[9] One can hardly imagine Jane Austen expecting her readers to go through such convulsions (some of which are impossible for one holding a book), and in fact Austen's dialogues are only infrequently marked by stage directions. Elizabeth's and Darcy's dance at Netherfield is typical in this respect. Very little gesture is indicated, especially in the direct dialogue, and the indications of tones instruct the reader less about "passions" to enact than simple tone of voice: Elizabeth replies "archly" and "with emphasis," Darcy "with a firm voice," "gravely," and "coldly" (pp. 91–94).

In his essay Blair directs his comments to "speakers," not readers. But the distinction between speakers and readers throughout the elocution

8 On this shift see Michael Vande Berg, "'Pictures of Pronunciation': Typographical Travels Through *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le fataliste*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 21 (1987–88), 21–47.

9 Burgh, *The Art of Speaking* (London: Longman, 1761), pp. 19, 24.

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movement is a blurry one; in his hints on marking a prepared text, for example, Blair clearly foresees a reading, not extemporaneous speech. The editors who affixed the "Lecture on Pronunciation, or Delivery" to anthologies like *Elegant Extracts* obviously assumed that their books would be read aloud and that Blair's advice was pertinent. It is not unreasonable to suppose, then, that Blair and the other elocutionists articulated the concerns of readers like Jane Austen.

The concerns discussed so far have been at the level of sentence construction: in many details, Austen seems to have indicated preferred readings for the benefit of someone reading *Pride and Prejudice* aloud without preparation, as her mother read it to Miss Benn. But did the performance practice of reading affect *Pride and Prejudice* on a larger scale? John Rice, in his *Introduction to the Art of Reading*, presumes "that the Observations contained in this Work, may be of some Service also to Writers, by inducing them to pay Attention to the Manner in which their Works may be recited; a Circumstance that will necessarily improve and meliorate their Stile."[10] The writer who anticipates an oral reading will prepare a text that is easy to read aloud, that takes advantage of the benefits of oral reading, that minimizes sections that do not read well. Of course, oral reading affects the perception of literature in many ways that are independent of any specific historical context; Walter J. Ong and others have studied the many psychological and cultural repercussions of orality.[11] But here I will limit my comments to three implications of oral reading that *are* dependent on contemporary performance practice and that directly affect *Pride and Prejudice*. In particular, I will link performance practice with Austen's style, her domestic scale, and her innovative use of female characters.

Oral reading favours dialogue over narration.

In his *Chironomia; or, a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery*, Gilbert Austin points out that "Novels, or modern fictitious biography, are so frequently

10 John Rice, *An Introduction to the Art of Reading with Energy and Propriety* (London: Tonson, 1765), p. 6.

11 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982) and other works. For more historical accounts, see Josef Balogh, "'Voces Paginarum.' Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens," *Philologus* 82 (1926), 84–109, 202–40 on reading aloud in the ancient and medieval periods; Susan Noakes, *Timely Reading: Between Exegesis and Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) on the late Middle Ages; and William Nelson, "From 'Listen, Lordlings' to 'Dear Reader,'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 46 (1976–77), 110–24 on the Renaissance. There has as yet been no major study of reading literature aloud in the eighteenth century.

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the subject of private readings, and influence so much the taste of young people, that they demand some notice. ... In reading these works aloud to the private circle, custom, arising from the eager desire of unravelling the story, has determined that the mere narrative should be read with unusual rapidity. The interesting scenes demand impressive reading, and many of the scenes, which are constructed like those in a regular drama, require to be read in a similar manner."[12] If "mere narrative" was customarily slighted by the reader, an author anticipating oral reading would have an excellent incentive to write dialogue. Austen's novels are, of course, rich in dialogue: the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* is almost entirely in dialogue, allowing the reader to engage the audience immediately by enacting the characters.

But the sprightliness of dialogue can extend to narration if the narrator is highly personalized. In the domestic reading circle, in fact, it would be absurd to have an anonymous, neutral narrator. The narrative "voice" is literally the voice of someone one knows, perhaps one's own mother. The reader would logically use her own voice for the narrator, reserving mimicry for the dialogue. The narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* is neither neutral nor anonymous: by devoting herself so exclusively to the private, "female" concerns of love and matrimony, she is much more easily imagined as female than male, and her incisive wit makes her very much an individual woman.[13]

Austen's narrative is frequently enlivened even further by her use of free indirect discourse, which either she or Frances Burney (another author whose works were read aloud) is credited with inventing.[14] Free indirect discourse encourages the reader to intersperse other voices with her own, even in snatches of a phrase here or there, where fully-realized dialogue is not needed. While free indirect discourse is more prevalent in the later novels, there are examples of it in *Pride and Prejudice*, such as this from chapter 3:

12 Austin, *Chironomia; or, a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1806), pp. 205–6.

13 This emphasis on female concerns, rather than the "public," male world, is of course what led some earlier critics to underrate Austen's novels. It is part of my larger argument that Austen's domestic scale can be understood, at least in part, as simply the best use of her performing resources.

14 On Austen's use of free indirect discourse, see Graham Hough, "Narrative and Dialogue in Jane Austen," *Critical Quarterly* 12 (1970), 201–29; Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977); Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972) and *Speech in the English Novel*, 2nd ed. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988) and others.

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> An invitation to dinner was soon afterwards dispatched; and already had Mrs. Bennet planned the courses that were to do credit to her housekeeping, when *an answer arrived which deferred it all.* Mr. Bingley was obliged to be in town the following day, and consequently unable to accept the honour of their invitation, &c. *Mrs. Bennet was quite disconcerted.* She could not imagine what business he could have in town so soon after his arrival in Hertfordshire; and she began to fear that he might be always flying about from one place to another, and never settled at Netherfield as he ought to be. (pp. 9–10, emphasis added)

Free indirect discourse allows the reader to make better use of her acting skills; in this passage, separate voices would contrast Bingley's formal politeness with Mrs Bennet's petulance, and in each case, Austen has given the reader cues (shown here in italic type) as to which voice to use in the sentence that follows. The passage is most vivid when read aloud.[15]

Both dialogue and free indirect discourse demand a very attentive reader. While Austen complained of her mother's inability to portray the characters in dialogue, she herself was skilled at this. Her niece Caroline wrote, "She was considered to read aloud remarkably well. I did not often hear her but *once* I knew her to take up a volume of Evelina and read a few pages of Mr. Smith and the Brangtons [*sic*] and I thought it was like a play."[16] The simile is apt: the text of the novel is only a script, to be performed by the actor/reader. Austen fills *Pride and Prejudice* with dialogues that are almost like plays, connected by narrative passages enlivened by the voices of both narrator and characters. Very little is "mere narrative," to be diminished by being "read with unusual rapidity."

Oral reading enforces a domestic scale by favouring dialogue between two characters over larger conversations.

If the novel is to be like a play, the author must not overreach the reader's virtuosity. Gilbert Austin's advice on reading dramatic texts suggests that the reader was to drop the attributions as much as possible, relying instead on changes of voice to differentiate the characters: "In the reading of plays [in mere private and family society], the names of the characters are sometimes read in a sort of dry under voice before the passages

15 Roy Pascal takes this point one step further. Although he does not address oral reading in any detail, when discussing a particularly complex usage of free indirect discourse in *Mansfield Park*, he notes that "such confusions are most likely to be avoided by reading the passage aloud, when the mimicry wins its full force" (*The Dual Voice*, p. 57).

16 Caroline Austen, *My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir* (London: Spottiswood, Ballantyne and Co., 1952), p. 10.

they are supposed to speak: but this awkward expedient should not be used except to prevent ambiguity. ... A person of taste and judgment will feel when he may divest his reading of this incumbrance, and will know when he ought to submit to it" (p. 202). Dropping the attributions increases the difficulty of reading a dramatic text; in choosing a scene to perform, the reader would recognize his limitations and choose one with few characters. The school anthologies always included dramatic dialogues, but almost never scenes with more than two characters: that is simply beyond the range of the amateur performer.

Austen's novel reflects this limitation. The scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* that are most like a play—the opening chapter, Mr Collins's proposal, Elizabeth's confrontation with Lady Catherine, and so on—are dialogues between two characters. Austen has taken advantage of the lively reader, but not strained her abilities. This enforced intimacy limits the scope of the novel, virtually forbidding large public scenes and favouring private conversation.

For example, one long scene, which might have been the occasion for a large group discussion, is written, surprisingly, in a series of dialogues: the Netherfield ball (pp. 89–103). During the scene there are times when more than two people stand together, but almost never do more than two speak. Except for one brief interruption, when Elizabeth dances with Darcy their conversation is sheltered; Elizabeth's conversations with Miss Bingley, Jane, and Mr Collins, in turn, are private. Again, this limitation affects the scope of Austen's material, precluding grand public action. But Austen takes advantage of the limitation, making privacy essential in furthering the plot. In a private conversation with Elizabeth, Miss Bingley warns her against Mr Wickham; her warning is easy for Elizabeth to discount because it is unchecked by any third person. Even more telling is Elizabeth's dance with Mr Darcy: the privacy allows a remarkably intimate conversation, in which she accuses Darcy of mistreating Mr Wickham. Such a conversation would be unthinkable in a larger party. Yet Elizabeth and Darcy *are* in a larger party, but it is made intimate by the performance practice of reading.

The many engagements in *Pride and Prejudice* are similarly announced only in private. Like a ball, an engagement announcement is inherently public, making Austen's choices counter-intuitive unless we consider performance practice. The first engagement, Charlotte's to Mr Collins, is broken to Elizabeth alone, in dialogue, before the public announcement, given in indirect discourse.[17] In the second, Jane's to Mr

17 Austen frequently uses only indirect discourse in the larger scenes. The dinner at Rosings is

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Bingley, Austen employs almost farcical entrances and exits: when Elizabeth breaks into their tête-à-tête, Bingley hurries out to ask Mr Bennet's permission, leaving Jane to speak privately with Elizabeth; as soon as Bingley returns, Jane goes off, again leaving Elizabeth in a private dialogue. And finally, Elizabeth discusses her own engagement to Darcy, not with her family as a whole, but with Jane, her father, and her mother, in turn; the three characters all express incredulity, but their different reactions let us enjoy unhurriedly Jane's love of Elizabeth, Mr Bennet's love of teasing, and Mrs Bennet's love of money. Instead of a large scene, with many confusing voices, the reader need perform only a series of dialogues, each with its own pleasures. The novelist has made choices that ease the performer's burden, and that emphasize privacy, domesticity, and individual characterizations. Austen's comic effects depend not at all on the typography crucial to *Tristram Shandy* or *Humphry Clinker*, both of which would lose significant power if read aloud. Rather, her comedy relies on characters who are best realized in a dramatic reading.

Performance practice may also explain why Austen utilizes a comparatively narrow range of speech. As Norman Page has observed, Austen makes no use of vivid dialect; her characters' speech exhibits no regional or class difference. A character like Mr Martin in *Emma*, who is not a member of the gentry, may be given no speech at all.[18] The characters in *Pride and Prejudice* speak in voices as different as Lydia's slang and Mr Collins's pomposity—but these differences are well within the experience of Austen's readers. Austen's most likely reader was someone like her mother: a middle-class woman, of limited education and experience, who may have understood the characters, but who could not "speak as they ought." An author anticipating such a reader would make the best use of characters the reader could impersonate—women of her station—and minimize her use of anyone different.

Austen's works were performed by women, for women, and her novels speak in women's voices.

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in indirect discourse, until the ladies remove to the drawing room; then only Lady Catherine and Elizabeth speak (pp. 162–66). Indirect discourse may also relieve the reader where three or four people speak: at Netherfield, the reader must enact Elizabeth, Darcy, and Bingley, but Miss Bingley's speech is indirect (pp. 49–51); after meeting Darcy, Mr and Mrs Gardiner speak directly but Elizabeth only in indirect discourse (pp. 257–58), and so on. Had Austen not been considering the limitations of the performer, one would expect indirect discourse to be randomly spread among all characters.

18 Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, pp. 141, 161.

During this period, reading was sexually segregated. I have argued elsewhere that it was customary for men to read to women; in fact, to protect women from immoral texts by choosing, censoring, and interpreting the novels they read.[19] But Austen lived in a world populated almost entirely by women. After her father died, there was rarely a man around the house, and her usual reading circle was female; the reading of *Pride and Prejudice* that Austen described in her letter was typical in this respect. It is not surprising, then, that Austen's novels favour female voices.

It would be foolish to suppose it impossible that a man should read a female role, or vice versa. A novel like *Evelina* was read aloud by both men and women (by Charles Burney and Jane Austen, for example), with no sense that that was inappropriate.[20] But if cross-sexual readings were not absolutely forbidden, neither were they the common case. In the speeches and dramatic dialogues reprinted in school anthologies intended for boys, like Enfield's *The Speaker* or Knox's *Elegant Extracts*, nearly all of the speakers were male. Wollstonecraft's *The Female Reader*, on the other hand, included a much larger proportion of women's voices.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the liveliest speakers are women; the men are comparatively mute. Two sets of relatives are analogous in this respect: while Mr Bennet and Elizabeth are both known for their enjoyment of laughing at their neighbours, Mr Bennet provokes his wife primarily by his silence (as in chapter 1); Elizabeth's barbs are always in words. Similarly, Darcy and Lady Catherine are supposed, at first, to be alike. But during Elizabeth's stay at Netherfield, Darcy defends himself by his silence; Lady Catherine, in Kent and in Hertfordshire, by her piercing speech. Darcy's proposal to Elizabeth is told almost entirely in indirect discourse (which requires less acting ability); Lady Catherine's subsequent confrontation with Elizabeth is one of the liveliest dialogues in the novel. It has often been noted that in all of Austen's novels, there is not a single dialogue between men alone. Perhaps she avoided such dialogue, not because it could not be written (as some have suggested),[21] but because it could not be read.

19 "Women in the Reading Circle," *Eighteenth-Century Life* n.s. 13, no. 3 (1989), 59–69.

20 For Austen's reading aloud see n. 16; Burney's is described in *The Early Diary of Frances Burney*, ed. Annie Raine Ellis, 2 vols (London: Bell, 1907), II, 222–45.

21 John Halperin considers this another example of what Chapman termed Austen's "realistic scruples": she would not write something she had never experienced (*The Life of Jane Austen* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984], p. 213). The one male character who speaks *ad nauseam*, Mr Collins, represents a type of clergyman undoubtedly well known to Austen and her readers, one whose voice is easily imitated.

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Austen's preference for female voices signifies more than a concession to the limited abilities of her reader: it is arguably her greatest innovation. While Sheldon Sacks, a critic unaffected by feminism, showed that Austen was the first to require real growth before granting her characters (of both sexes) their reward, Susan Morgan points out that Austen was the first to allow women to grow at all.[22] Austen's women are neither victims nor harlots; they are human beings with much on their minds besides their virginity. I would hesitate to argue that performance practice in any way "caused" Austen to consider women more seriously than previous authors had done. Rather, it presented her with resources (women's voices) and limitations (the demand for private conversations), of which she made excellent use.

Every performing medium has its limitations and its opportunities. Reading aloud will tend to characterize a narrator, to enliven dialogue, in sum, to make a novel more like a play, that is, public, though with manifest consideration taken for the performing resources and the scale of the production. Moreover, in a small-scale production, interest will be focused on characters rather than spectacle. Other authors, anticipating different kinds of performances, have made choices other than those made by Austen. Charles Dickens, for example, made eloquent use of dialect and ideolect, and his characters people the entire universe of nineteenth-century England. Dickens revised his early novels, and wrote his later ones, to be performed by himself to a paying audience. Dickens was indeed a virtuoso reader, and his novels show off his skill.[23] But Austen's novels were performed in the family circle, by three or four women sitting together of an evening. To use a musical analogy, if Dickens's novels are grand opera, Austen's are *lieder*: the intimacy of the performing situation is reflected in the privacy, the intimacy of the "score." Austen's reader is not asked to range much beyond the world, the characters, and the language she knows. Within that world, her voice renders characters—women—more real than any in earlier novels. The performance practice of reading in Austen's world favoured the private scenes and female dialogue that inform *Pride and Prejudice*.

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22 Sacks, "Golden Birds and Dying Generations," *Comparative Literature Studies* 6 (1969), 274–91, especially 285–86; Morgan, "Why There's No Sex in Jane Austen's Novels," *Studies in the Novel* 19 (1987), 346–56.

23 See "Dickens and Speech," chap. 6 in Page, *Speech in the English Novel*, especially pp. 143–46.