

**Austen and Autism:  
Reading Brain, Emotion and Gender Differences in *Pride and Prejudice***

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**Introduction: Rereading *Pride and Prejudice***

<1>The central romance in *Pride and Prejudice* begins when Mr. Darcy refuses to dance in an unfamiliar social setting. His explanation of his behavior - "I detest it unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner"(8)([1](#)) - has been interpreted by generations of readers as the excuse of a man with "ten thousand a year" (8) who reeks of class privilege and indifference to social inferiors. Some hundred pages later, Mr. Darcy repeats his confession saying, "I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers" (116). Hearing this, Elizabeth Bennet addresses her reply to Darcy's cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam. "Shall we ask him," she queries, "why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?" Fitzwilliam tells her, "It is because he will not give himself the trouble" (116).

<2>Darcy's own reason is quite different. "I certainly have not the talent which some people possess of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done" (116). Here too, readers, like the characters with whom Darcy is conversing, perceive his reply as an expression of class privilege. This essay asks what happens to our understanding of Darcy and Elizabeth if we take Darcy at his word, i.e., we accept that he *really* cannot easily decipher social interactions. It asks, more specifically, what happens to our understanding of these characters if we read Darcy's social inadequacy as a product of disability rather than an individual choice. How does such a reading affect our perceptions of Darcy, Elizabeth and the novel in general if we interpret Darcy's self - presentation *literally* rather than ironically?([2](#)) Further, what becomes of the larger issues traditionally understood as the novel's main concerns: relations between genders and classes, women's growth and autonomy, the pitfalls and triumphs of communication? And what happens if we interpret a novelistic character through the lens of neurology over (or in addition to) the lens of class and gender difference?

<3>To begin with, such a reading would mark a radical shift in the critical tradition of *Pride and Prejudice*, which has been grounded for nearly two centuries in the assumption that Darcy's behavior is a product of agency and choice; this is how Darcy is also regarded within the novel's world: by Elizabeth Bennet, by Colonel Fitzwilliam and by nearly every other character in the novel. But what if we were to make the opposite assumption: that Darcy's social awkwardness is owed to an organic condition which is at least in part outside his control? This relatively narrow question raises many larger ones, some of which have begun to be addressed by Lisa Zunshine, Ellen Spolsky, Alan Richardson, Blakey Vermeule and other humanistic scholars working on biosocial approaches to literature.

<4>Nineteenth century novels, Austen's in particular, have provided excellent raw material for the discussion of these approaches. Austen's protracted, leisurely explorations of characters' affective and cognitive states within their cultural environments seemingly reveal, as Kay Young writes, a "modern, post-Cartesian conception of the integrated mind – as cognitive, affective, embodied and relational" (4). This engagement with the nature of mind and consciousness in Austen's novels is not incidental to her plots; rather, as Palmer and Richardson have shown, Austen's slowly evolving plots allow for a serious interrogation of the nature of mind and brain, including its various "types" and constitutions.

<5>Taking the works of these critics as my starting point, I will present in what follows a triple-tiered argument. First, I will argue that the quality of Darcy's social communication can and should be read through the lens of disability; more specifically, I will argue that Darcy's characterization is that of a man on the mild side of the autistic spectrum. Secondly, I will use this understanding of Darcy's character, particularly in relation to the character of Elizabeth Bennet, to interrogate the idea of the spectrum and consider the impact this possibility may have on contemporary literary theory. Thirdly, I will treat the gendered aspect of what has come to be termed "neurodiversity" and look at the ways in which taking autism into account may reshape feminist theory and how feminist theory, in turn, can help us think of autism in more compassionate and productive ways. In particular I will argue that the recent turn to emotions in humanistic and social study, coupled with current research on the pliability of the brain and its inter-related nature, can help us form more generous ideas about both gender differences and social-emotional disability.

### **Autism: A Quick Review**

<6>The term autism did not, of course, exist as a diagnostic category in Austen's time, though there have been attempts to point to cases of autism that predate the actual naming of the disorder.<sup>(3)</sup> There are also recent attempts to "diagnose" nineteenth century literary characters with autism.<sup>(4)</sup> The term Autism is first mentioned in a 1943

paper titled “Autistic Disturbances of the Affective Contact,” by the pediatric neurologist Leon Kanner. In this paper, Kanner discusses case studies of eleven children - eight boys and three girls ranging from age three to seven who, despite being cognitively normal and even of superior intellectual ability, present impairment in social and communicative skills. The children’s outstanding, “pathognomonic,” fundamental disorder, Kanner concludes, is a failure to develop the usual amount of social awareness and an “inability to relate in the ordinary way to people and situations.” This is displayed in the children’s seeming lack of social “interest,” in their choice of language - they used literal, impersonal utterances – and their social rigidity and lack of spontaneity. Other distinct features that Kanner identifies in his subjects are excellent rote and visual memory, marked fondness for music, “strikingly intelligent physiognomies,” and “serious-minded” appearances. All subjects, Kanner notes, come from “highly intelligent families,” to the extent that eight out of the eleven families were represented either in *Who’s Who in America* or in *American Men of Science*, or in both. Although there are numerous theories and controversies today around the nature and characteristics of autism,<sup>(5)</sup> many of the behaviors described in Kanner’s original paper still appear in the definition of “Autistic Spectrum Disorders” (ASD) in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V). Yet while Kanner describes only case studies of severe social impairment, the current definition of ASD includes variations, subtypes, and degrees of what was previously deemed “classic” autism.

<7>People with ASD tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items. Again, the symptoms of people with ASD will fall on a *continuum*, with some individuals showing mild symptoms and others having much more severe symptoms. This spectrum will allow clinicians to account for the variations in symptoms and behaviors from person to person.<sup>(6)</sup>

<8>DSM-V also recognizes, for the first time, a “Social Communication Disorder” (SCD) that is distinct from ASD yet possesses some of the same diagnostic features: difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, inappropriate responses in conversation and limitations in social relationships.<sup>(7)</sup> This new category points not only to an expansion in the definition of communication disorders but to an implicit recognition of the importance of effective social and emotional behavior.

### **Darcy’s Social Impairment**

<9>If only because autism had yet to be diagnosed in the nineteenth century, we cannot assume that Austen intentionally created explicitly autistic characters, as do contemporary novelists such as Mark Haddon in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the*

*Night-Time* or Graeme Simsion in *The Rosie Project*. Still, there is plenty of evidence in *Pride and Prejudice* to suggest that had Darcy been a literary character conceived within the past three decades (like Simsion's wife-seeking Don Tillman) his character would potentially be linked to ASD or SCD.

<10>From Darcy's very first appearance in the novel, at the Netherfield ball, his social behavior is described as giving offence to others ("he was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and every body hoped that he would never come there again" (8)). He defies basic convention and good manners by refusing to dance at a ball, in which he is a guest ("I certainly shall not [dance]. You know how I detest it" (8)); he rejects Elizabeth directly without decorum ("he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, 'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me'" (8-9)); he spends the evening pacing ("walking about the room"). Darcy's "manners" at the ball, the narrator reports, soon "gave a disgust" (8), which overshadowed his good looks, much-advertised wealth, and high social standing.

<11>Temple Grandin, the popular self-explicator of autism, recounts many similar situations in her autobiography, *Thinking in Pictures* – a new job, a large party - where she is quick to offend and become the object of loathing to strangers.(8) The "disgust" of which Austen writes - not "discomfort" or "disapproval"- is the kind of social affect Grandin reports as evoking in others as well.(9)

<12>Darcy's odd social behavior persists throughout the novel (he is often in a state of "silent indignation" (18)) culminating with his sudden marriage proposal to Elizabeth. This proposal betrays not only the most literal language use, but a difficulty in deploying language pragmatically and a total unawareness of its recipient:

In an hurried manner, he [Darcy] immediately began an inquiry after her [Elizabeth's] health, imputing his visit to a wish of hearing that she were better. She answered him with cold civility. He sat down for a few moments, and then getting up walked about the room. Elizabeth was surprised, but said not a word. After a silence of several minutes he came towards her in an agitated manner, and thus began: "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."... He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed... His sense of her inferiority – of its being a degradation – of the family obstacles which had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding... (125)

<13>Several things can be deduced from this extraordinary passage. First, that Darcy is completely oblivious to Elizabeth's state of mind when he walks into the room to deliver his proposal; second, that he has not the faintest idea whether she is ready to receive it;

third, that Darcy is unaware of the possible effect his words could have on Elizabeth; and fourth, that his warm manner of delivery does not match the insulting content of his message. Even before Elizabeth answers, the narrator concludes that Darcy's delivery "was unlikely to recommend his suit" (125).

<14>The stunted marriage proposal is all too typical of Darcy's communication style, which throughout the novel remains rigid, simple, and categorical. Often he speaks in general, impersonal statements: His remark, "I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these" (26), for example, betrays indifference to the fact that Elizabeth's family may fail to replenish its library not out of "neglect" but because of their much diminished financial status.

<15>Darcy is all too prone to utterances absent of any apparent sensitivity to their recipients: "I am in no humour to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (9); "A woman must have thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages to deserve the word [accomplished]" (27); "To yield [to the persuasion of a friend] without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either" (34); and so on. Other characters may be caricatured as snobs who intend to humiliate, but Darcy's speech seems to simply lack in elasticity, emotional subtlety and social awareness.

<16>Much of the novel's comic play rests, in fact, on the contrast between Elizabeth's linguistic competence and complexity - her fondness for metaphor and irony - and Darcy's literal-mindedness. When, for example, Darcy professes that he hasn't "the talent" to interact with strangers in a conversation, Elizabeth reciprocates with a piano playing metaphor:

My fingers do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault - because I would not take the trouble of practicing. It is not that I do not believe *my* fingers as capable of any other woman's of superior execution. (116-17)

To which Darcy replies: "You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers" (117).

<17>Darcy's words may warm Elizabeth and raise the level of flirtatiousness between them. But a close reading of this exchange reveals that Darcy has not in the least grasped the meaning of Elizabeth's utterance; while she is using her middling piano playing as a metaphor for his middling social competence (suggesting that unlike him, she holds *herself* responsible for the quality of her art) Darcy, in turn, compliments her

on her skill at the piano, implying, quite absurdly, that they are *both* private and socially reticent, a response that is in fact completely off point! Is Darcy cleverly ducking Elizabeth's criticism with shrewd flattery? Perhaps, but unlikely; for such shrewdness is entirely out of character given Darcy's otherwise simple, direct, over-serious style. More likely, he is completely sincere: strongly affected by Elizabeth's music, but hopelessly oblivious to her complex metaphors and biting irony. Likewise, when Elizabeth states ironically that "Mr. Darcy is all politeness" (18) we are told that "her resistance had not injured her with the gentleman" (19). Darcy, the text implies, had not comprehended the resistance embedded in Elizabeth's non-literal response and thus could continue with his courtship of her undeterred.

<18>There are, arguably, two places in the text that may appear to challenge my reading of Darcy as a character on the spectrum: his housekeeper's testimony that Darcy was "the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted, boy in the world" (161), and his long-standing friendship with the affable Charles Bingley, which appears to confirm his social ability. Actually, these examples do not contradict the case I am making. For, in *Darcy*, Austen creates a character who functions well in clearly demarcated hierarchical relationships, as that between master and servant, governed as they are by clear rules of convention and by the assumption of subservience. Thus, interactions with a socially inferior, flexible, good natured, playful and loyal friend as Bingley survive Darcy's social difficulties. Though Darcy's social communication difficulties are not a consequence of his social standing, his social standing shelters him from having to account for them.

### **The Spectrum of Humanity**

<19>In reading Darcy as a literary representation of a young man on the spectrum we assume that his brain functions differently than others'.<sup>(10)</sup> We may assume, for example, that the auditory sensory input of a particular noise may cause sensory overload and extreme discomfort. "My ears are like microphones picking up all sounds with equal intensity," Temple Grandin writes (64). Other autistics report a similar phenomenon with vision: an inability to tune out visual input, particularly in new and unpredictable circumstances. Slow brain processing, high distractibility and social anxiety are all associated with autism; no wonder then that Darcy is unable to truly see Elizabeth at the ball but notices her only later, in much calmer circumstances.

<20>Recognizing neurological differences and distinct functioning of the brain presents a significant challenge not only to our reading of the novel but to the most conventional assumptions about the essence of a human being. For despite the host of "differences" introduced by post-structuralist theory in past decades, our basic model of selfhood has in many ways remained homogeneous from Plato to the present. On some rudimentary level we assume that every "typically developing" human being experiences a similar

range of emotions (types of emotions and intensity may vary between cultures, groups, and persons) and perceive the world outside the self in fundamentally similar ways. Surely we assume that people may respond differently to different stimuli, according to their place in the social hierarchy, their gender, etc., but were these people born into, say, a gender-neutral planet, their experience would be uniform. When, for example, in *Transmission of Affect* (2004), Teresa Brennan defines affect as the amorphous “feeling” that floats between persons – she assumes it is uniformly experienced by all in its vicinity.(11) And similar assumptions are embedded in Antonio Damasio’s popular model of human emotions, which can be summarized as follows:

Inducer (photo of loved one, blueness of sky, hormonal change) → emotion (firing up of neural patterns in particular area of the brain associated with a particular emotion) → feeling (internal) → core consciousness (cognition of the feeling) → extended consciousness (absorption of this cognition of feeling into the sense of the autobiographical self.)(12)

<21>But what if we consider that in some brains, the inducer does not cause the anticipated reaction because it isn’t processed normatively; what if, for example, the expression on the photographic image of the loved one is interpreted by the gazer as a mocking grin rather than a loving smile, or if the viewer’s attention rests not at the face of the loved one but at a negligible detail in the image’s background. For people on the autistic spectrum, the world is experienced differently on a *sensory* level – a soft sound may be heard as shrill, a deep touch may feel like the brush of a feather – thereby triggering atypical social and emotional responses.

<22>But what, ultimately, can the understanding of brain differences teach those of us who are outside the therapeutic disciplines? And what is the importance of a “diagnosis” of autism when it involves a literary character? Certainly such a diagnosis can raise awareness and hopefully greater acceptance of individuals on the autistic spectrum; it may also coin a new kind of “difference” in literary study (beyond or alongside gender, class, etc.) This awareness may propel readers to a greater sensitivity in their reading of character in both literature and life. Broader links between autism and the humanities - the relationship between modernity and autism, or between autism and poetic language – have also been explored.(13) Yet what eludes much of this recent work is a serious analysis of “the spectrum”: a recognition that there are *many* types and degrees of sensory experience that lead to *many* types and degrees of relatedness, empathy, emotions, but also to differing attitudes towards rules, a variable range of interests, and differences in language use and understanding. Scientists (whose work is then adopted by humanists) tend to readily define norm and deviation.(14) Both Oliver Sacks and Antonio Damasio, widely known as translators of the neuroscientific world for popular audiences, focus on extreme cases of brain-damaged patients, such as Damasio’s “fearless” patient X (65). Yet between patient X and a “normal” model of emotional

functioning there exist as researchers now recognize a gray zone of brain wiring, sensory intake and emotional experience. We now know that one can be very autistic or a little autistic with an incredible range of idiosyncrasies in the middle; one can display autistic behaviors like social impropriety in certain settings (unfamiliar surroundings, anxiety-provoking situations) but not in others.<sup>(15)</sup> Autism, moreover, is now believed to be a *dynamic* condition, and as one matures one can develop adaptive measures – avoidance of stressful situations, learned codes of politeness – that compensate for social impropriety. All these can be observed in *Pride and Prejudice* if, for example, we compare Darcy’s character to others, or if we study the startling difference in his behavior at the Netherfield ball and in his own home, where Elizabeth’s relations find him “perfectly well behaved, polite, and unassuming” (167).

<23>A true acceptance of the spectrum would to a large degree unravel or at least complicate the model of binary opposition between normal and abnormal and fixed social identities that dominates the humanities.

### **Gendered Brains**

<24>Novels, therefore, may teach us about the spectrum, exposing readers to different types of brains and a variety of social-communication styles. That these types divide along gender lines in *Pride and Prejudice* is hardly in need of proof. For to the extent that Austen constructs Darcy as literal, socially awkward and largely oblivious to the feelings of others, she endows Elizabeth with superior tact and social acumen. Where Darcy offends with over-candid directness (“Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections?—to congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?” (127), Elizabeth refrains from expressing what will needlessly hurt others as when “she dared not relate the other half of Darcy’s letter nor explain to her sister how sincerely she had been valued by her friend” (165).

<25> Where Darcy is rigid and conventional, Elizabeth has “a lively, playful disposition” (9). Never in the plot does Austen have Elizabeth say or do something that does not take into account the recipient of her words and actions; she possesses, in other words, excellent “theory of mind” – the ability to imagine the mind of others - and spends much time surmising about others. But Darcy cares little for the thoughts and feelings of others and reads them incorrectly, in any case.

<26>Though controversial, our most comprehensive analysis of gender and autism to-date is Simon Baron-Cohen’s “Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism.”<sup>(16)</sup> Drawing on the fact that children who are diagnosed with autism tend to be disproportionately male,<sup>(17)</sup> Baron-Cohen argues that individuals with ASD display markedly superior abilities in tasks that males as a group have been found to excel in and markedly poor

abilities in tasks in which females are found to have superior abilities. His work draws on a synthesis of prior studies of gender differences. These studies have found that females are superior in language tasks. Girls demonstrate a faster rate of language development and a lower risk for specific language impairments (Buffery and Gray, 1972; Kimura, 1992; Halpern, 1992; McGee, 1979; Geary, 1996); social judgment (Hall, 1977; Halpern, 1992; Argyle and Cooke, 1976); empathy (Hutt, 1972), pretend play in childhood (Hutt, 1972), and mindreading tasks (Rutter, 1978). Males as a group have been found to be superior to females in mathematical reasoning, especially geometry and mathematical word problems (Lummis and Stevenson, 1990; Stevenson et al, 1990; Marshall and Smith, 1987), “mental rotation” tasks such as imagining how an object will look when it is rotated, or how a sheet of paper will look when it is folded (Masters and Sanders, 1993; Kalichman, 1989); target-directed motor skills, such as guiding or intercepting projectiles, irrespective of the amount of practice (Kimura, 1992; Buffery and Gray, 1972); and in general in most spatial skills (Linn and Petersen, 1985; Gilger and Ho, 1989; Law, Pellegrino, and Hunt 1993). All individuals, be they biologically male or female, fall within a continuum of the male and female brain, Baron-Cohen argues. Yet autistics - who are also predominantly biologically male - fall markedly on the male brain side of the continuum. They tend to be exceptionally skilled in tasks in which males have been found to excel and extremely impaired in tasks in which females have been found to be superior (Baron-Cohen et al, 1996).[\(18\)](#)

<27>Baron-Cohen’s theory rests largely on existent studies; to-date, no specific neural structures unique to male or female brain types have been identified. Yet other biological explanations of gendered cognitive differences have been proven. For example, Baron-Cohen cites studies in which exposure to androgens prenatally has been found to increase spatial performance in human females and females of other species (Resnick et al, 1986; Hines and Green, 1991; and Halpern, 1992) and castration of rats has been found to decrease spatial ability (Williams, Barnett, and Meck, 1990). These findings suggest that aspects of skills such as spatial ability are affected by hormonal differences and changes. To the extent that such biological models of gender difference may run the risk of reinforcing conservative and even antiquated assumptions about gender,[\(19\)](#) their model of autism is implicitly progressive, suggesting organic ties between “normal” male and female skills and autistic behaviors. Baron-Cohen’s theory places traits linked to autism *within* – even if at the extreme edge - of a range of human behavior and points not only to the deficits but also to the *benefits* and skills of the autistic/ extreme male brain. This is a welcome change.

<28>A literal demonstration of the benefits of the autistic mind can be observed in *Pride and Prejudice*’s plot, which pits Darcy’s and Elizabeth’s brain styles against each other. Though the novel is far from presenting an uncritical celebration of Darcy’s “autistic

spectrum brain,” this does not lead to an uncritical celebration of Elizabeth’s “normal brain.” For though Elizabeth displays strong theory of mind, her excessive empathy leaves her open to manipulation by, for example, the charismatic George Wickham, whose false story of misery and victimhood she readily believes. And though Darcy is depicted as rigid, categorical and socially inept, his disregard for others, including both Elizabeth’s family and his own, allows him a measure of autonomy of thought that ultimately advances his unconventional choice. Austen, whose fiction grew out of the sensibility tradition, clearly emphasizes and celebrates Elizabeth’s impressive social-emotional range; yet she also writes *contra* the sentimental tradition and as such she also highlights the *advantages* of Darcy’s systematizing and non-reactionary nature. In practice, as the plot reveals, Darcy is not deterred by Elizabeth’s initial rejection (“her resistance had not injured her with the gentleman, and he was thinking of her with some complacency” (19)). He is not even seriously fazed by Elizabeth’s adamant and unequivocal rejection of his first marriage proposal. Like many on the spectrum, Darcy is not particularly reactive to his environment and acts with independent resolve. “Mild autistic traits,” Temple Grandin writes, “can provide the single-mindedness that gets things done,” and were it not for the obsessiveness, persistence, obliviousness to conventions and other unique qualities of autistics, bridges might not have been built and Relativity Theory might not have materialized (215). Nor perhaps would the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* end as it does, with three successful and unconventional marriages.

### **The Plaintiff Brain**

<29>Perhaps the most interesting contribution that *Pride and Prejudice* and the novel at large can make in relation to autism is that they do not merely represent differences but allow us to observe the autistic brain in *context*. As such, the unfolding plot of *Pride and Prejudice* paints a picture of the brain as fluid and pliant as it interacts and is changed by other brains. The autistic brain, the novel suggests, not only possesses disadvantages and merits but also has the potential for growth and change.

<30>In the United States, many children diagnosed with ASD receive a social-emotional education that indeed often leads to degrees of growth. Most of it falls into one of two major categories: *Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)* and *Developmental Individual Relationship (DIR)/Floor-time*; in the first (and most popular), behaviors that are all but intuitive to typically developing children – looking at interlocutors’ eyes when speaking to them, answering questions, etc. – are taught through behavioral learning techniques: repetition, reinforcement and the like. The second, *DIR*, is a psychodynamic, play-based technique, focused on the dynamics of a relationship that gets played out between the child and the therapist. Both interventions teach the child on the spectrum – through imitation, feedback, and direct instruction – how to navigate the social-emotional world.(20)

<31>In the imaginary world of *Pride and Prejudice*, which predates any diagnosis or treatment of autism, Darcy's emotional education occurs through his extended verbal and non-verbal dialogue with Elizabeth, who challenges his rigidity, expands his linguistic and emotional capacity, and provides a model of imitation for him. In the course of the novel's plot, Darcy is taught – through direct reproof and indirect imitation – how to transform his private, non-communicative feelings, which were there from the beginning of the novel and predated Elizabeth's, into a *social* emotion.<sup>(21)</sup> And as his attraction to Elizabeth and her direct and uncompromising reproach of him both grow, so does his social development and linguistic expressiveness. Darcy receives from Elizabeth, it could be said, a kind of social-emotional education that directly challenges his lack of empathy and demands communication (“from the very beginning – from the first moment I may almost say – of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others...” (126)). And yet Elizabeth's instruction of Darcy is not without its complications, tenuousness, resistances and setbacks. Because beyond the therapeutic setting – which is most of life – interactions between persons on the autistic spectrum and those who are not can be incredibly rewarding but can also be challenging, frustrating, even disastrous – as demonstrated by Darcy's initial “autistic” insult of Elizabeth.

<32>Darcy himself, it should be noted, attributes his lack of empathy and disinterest in others to nurture and not nature (“I have been selfish my whole life. I was spoiled by my parents, who though good themselves...allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing” (249)), though more accurately, in his case, nature and nurture should be read in tandem. Indeed, autistic spectrum behavior often masquerades as extreme egotism, particularly when it is coupled with class privilege.<sup>(22)</sup> Our analysis thus need not disregard Austen's delicious satirical critique of Darcy's aristocratic roots; rather, her novel allows us to observe how social privilege can serve as an enabler of some autistic behaviors. Elizabeth, as Austen shows us, is able to “instruct” Darcy largely because she ignores his privileged position and calls him on his “disdain of the feelings of others” rather than ignore it. “What do I not owe you!” Darcy exclaims at the end of the novel, “You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous!” (241).

### **Coda: Emotions, Gender and Autism**

<33>As we have seen, autism has points of contact with both feminist and class analysis. For if we take the lessons of autism and apply them to questions of gender – many of us, after all, are somewhere “on the spectrum” – we must accept that brains, identities and genders are both biologically different *and* considerably pliable. And we should perhaps more readily accept *and acknowledge* people with “female brain type” as (direct and largely inadvertent) emotional educators. After all, though autism is

primarily a male condition, it is perhaps not accidental that it took an autistic woman – Temple Grandin – to communicate its inner workings to the rest of the world.(23) And emotional education has been a (mostly implicit) role that female scholars and writers have played in the humanistic disciplines.

<34>It is not accidental that at our particular cultural juncture, just as the diagnosis of autism is sky-rocketing and its profile is raised in popular culture, humanistic academia is going in the opposite direction by placing emotions at the center of its discourse. After nearly half a century of politicized, confrontational, separatist, Foucauldian models of social differences qua hierarchies, the humanities have turned to a discussion of “emotional communities” and “transmission of affects.”(24) The tide has washed over the humanistic disciplines with a flood of emotion and affect which, according to historian William Reddy and others, has introduced greater flexibility and refinement to the crude, binary and divisive toolset of the post-structuralist theorist.(25) Much contemporary theory seeks to repair and bridge differences via the emotions and empathy rather than fracturing social identities and exposing oppressions – as, for example, Eve Sedgwick does in her now classic reading of “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl”.

<35>This emphasis on emotional competence has impacted not only our understanding of social identities and history but also of morality. Take, for example, philosopher Jesse Prinz’s argument, reiterated in many current popular renditions, that the basis of our moral judgment is emotional.(26)According to Prinz, emotional competence is a necessary condition without which moral judgment is impaired; Prinz does not discuss the types of emotions necessary or the ways in which they will be induced in subjects or impact them; rather, he assumes a normative model of emotional response according to which, we presume, the photo of a wounded child will evoke sadness in the gazer, and so on. The advantages of the autistic brain notwithstanding, this rise in the value that our society places on emotional competency points to an acute *disadvantage* for those on the autistic spectrum and to the urgent need for social-emotional education.

<36>Such “education” has in fact been given by feminist scholars who, for at least three decades, have written about the importance of emotions in social life, politics, morality and the law: Consider these writers and works: Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* (1986), Jessica Benjamin’s *Bonds of Love* (1988), Alison Jagger’s *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1988), Patricia Williams’ *Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1992), Doris Sommer’s *Foundational Fictions* (1993), Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1993), Martha Nussbaum’s *Upheavals of Thoughts: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2003). And this is only a partial list. There is finally a modicum of irony though, not to mention ingratitude, in attributing pioneering status to the current “turn” to emotions when virtually *all* works by feminists in the past three decades - the more well-known names and more politically and pedagogically motivated projects as well as the

hundreds and thousands of other works - have incorporated an emotional component into their subject matter (romantic love, friendship, empathy) or voice (personal and related, frank, first person writing that engages the reader directly). Taken cumulatively, producers of these writings – largely female and largely feminist – have served as the (unrecognized) emotional educators of mainstream academia, just as Elizabeth did for Darcy, and Austen continues to do for us. For as the Austen scholar Wendy Jones writes, “When we respond strongly to literature, the emotional component of our neural map becomes active: neurons fire along pathways within and between emotion center of the brain, thereby altering our feelings, our thoughts, our moods—and perhaps even our actions and characters” (338). Thus, a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* with an eye to its insights on brain, emotion and gender has the power to affect us in ways that more didactic and theoretical literature on the autistic spectrum cannot.

### Endnotes

(1)All subsequent quotes from *Pride and Prejudice* are taken from Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. 3rd Ed, (2001).<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)There are many ironic readings of Darcy in the history of Jane Austen criticism. For a recent example see Lee Overmann, “Darcy and Emma: Austen’s Ironic Meditation on Gender.” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal of Criticism* 31 (2009).<sup>(^)</sup>

(3)See for example Rab Houston and Uta Frith, *Autism in History: The Case of Hugh Blair of Borgue*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000.<sup>(^)</sup>

(4)See for example Julia Miele Rodas’s “diagnosis” of Jane Eyre in “On the Spectrum: Rereading Contact and Affect in *Jane Eyre* (2008).<sup>(^)</sup>

(5)See Andrew W. Zimmerman, ed., *Autism: Current Theories and Evidence*. Totowa, NJ: Humana Press, 2008.<sup>(^)</sup>

(6)APA 2013.

<http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/Autism%20Spectrum%20Disorder%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>. ASD replaced a prior definition of autism in DSM-IV, which distinguished between Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome (which designated “higher” functioning autistics), PDD (Pervasive Developmental Disorder) and PDD-NOS (a diagnosis used when not all criteria for PDD were met).<sup>(^)</sup>

(7)<http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/Social%20Communication%20Disorder%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf><sup>(^)</sup>

(8)Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (1996).<sup>(^)</sup>

(9)For a discussion of disgust as a reaction to violation of social norms see Daniel Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.(^)

(10)Treating a literary character – a linguistic construction made of words - as if it is a living person is bound to raise objections from some quarters; see for example, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2002: 31-72. Yet it has also been established, particularly by recent investigations of the neurological underpinnings of reading and writing, that readers *do* form mental images of literary characters and regard them as living persons, particularly when reading a realist novel. See Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters* (2010).(^)

(11)Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (2004).(^)

(12)Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (2000).(^)

(13)*Autism and Representation* (Osteen 2007).(^)

(14)Ann Jurecic's pioneering and admirable essay "Neurodiversity" (2007) is nonetheless an example of such "us" versus "them," health versus sick mentality.(^)

(15)In the virtual world, where websites, blogs and social networks by and for autistics are proliferating, the spectrum understanding of autism is given ample, often politically charged expression. See for example: "Actually Autistic."

<https://www.facebook.com/actuallyautistic>; "The View from My Brain."

<http://jemimaaslana.tumblr.com/page/266>; "Allism Speaks."

<http://allism-speaks.tumblr.com>;

*AspiesForFreedom.com*. <http://www.aspiesforfreedom.com/>(^)

(16)For a summary of Baron-Cohen's theory, see Simon Baron-Cohen, "The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism." *Trends in Cognitive Science* 6:6 (2002) 248-254.(^)

(17)Current statistics reveal that eight out of every ten autistic children are male.

See [www.dnalc.org/view/1130-Autism-Gender-Ratio.html](http://www.dnalc.org/view/1130-Autism-Gender-Ratio.html).(^)

(18)The data is taken from Simon Baron-Cohen, "The Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism." *Neurodevelopmental Disorders*. Tager-Flusberg, H, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999.(^)

(19)For such critique see Badcock, C. and Crespi, B. (2008). "Battle of the sexes may set the brain". *Nature* 454 (7208): 1054–1055.(^)

(20)For more on ABA, see Albert J. Kearney, *Understanding Applied Behavioral Analysis*. NYC: JKP Essentials, 2008. For more on DIR, see Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder, *Engaging Autism*. De Capo Lifelong Books, 2009 and Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder, *The Child with Special Needs: Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth*. NYC: Perseus Books, 1998.(^)

(21)There is currently no agreement on whether autism is linked to a deficit in emotions or to a bombardment of emotions (and other internal and/or external stimuli) against which the autistic yields a defense of disengagement, rigidity, and perseverative behaviors. Grandin writes extensively about emotions, in relation to both herself and others (including animals). She catalogs and describes emotions she experiences (fear, anger, the kind of happiness derived from solving a design problem.) She also catalogues emotions she does not feel but perceives in others such as guilt which results from experiencing two conflicting emotions at once. (91). Within the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's emotional range, at least at the beginning of the novel, appears to be AS limited as Grandin's, yet Darcy is also portrayed as capable of long-lasting emotional connection; his attachment is in fact longer than Elizabeth's, predating it by over a hundred pages. "I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation [of my attachment to you.] It is too long ago," he tells to Elizabeth at the conclusion of the novel" (248). It is an attachment, nonetheless, that could not be efficiently communicated to Elizabeth until Darcy had received Elizabeth's inadvertent social/ emotional instruction.(^)

(22)As Lombardo and Baron-Cohen note, one of the first characterizations of autism by Kanner and Hans Asperger focused on "extreme egocentrism." See Lombardo, M. V., & Baron-Cohen, S. "The Role of the Self in Mindblindness in Autism." *Consciousness and Cognition* (2010), doi:10.1016/j.concog.2010.09.006.(^)

(23)Even among autistics, it could perhaps be said that females like Grandin are better at communicating social emotions. When a severely autistic speech-deprived girl learned to write at age fifteen, the first words she typed on her keyboard were: "I am in pain." See <http://www.wimp.com/autisticgirl/>.(^)

(24)The term "emotional communities" was coined by Barbara Rosenwein. See Jan Plamper "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns." *History and Theory* 49 (May 2010), 252.(^)

(25)See Reddy interview in Jan Plamper. *Ibid.*, 241.(^)

(26)Jesse J. Prinz. *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007).(^)

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