"IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife" (3). But it is not a truth universally acknowledged that the opening sentence of Pride and Prejudice is not the simple proposition which many readers--including the journalists who often deploy its opening phrase as a vehicle for their own ironies--seem to be convinced it is. The "greatness" of the sentence is perhaps also attested by its having had a whole journal issue--and an amusingly disputatious one--devoted to it. (1) The initially grandiose tone of the epigram leads swiftly to bathos, summoning what Roland Barthes (ironically?) described as "the code of irony" to undo its own lapidary pomposity, hinting at a theme of "interested parties" behind a screen of high-mindedness. And Austen also seems to anticipate the effects of a Flaubertian Dictionary of Received Ideas here, preparing us for fatailities to follow.

Although a maxim whose literary efficacy is pretty well universally acknowledged, its substance would not necessarily be "acknowledged" by its own subject, the hypothetically "fortune-ate" man in question--which immediately puts the universality it asserts "under erasure." Indeed, as it seems clear that others--Darcy, for example--would emphatically fail to agree that "five-thousand-a-year" Bingley in particular is "in want of" a wife, this adage begins to sound female-specific, in the spirit of Emma Woodhouse's later claim that "One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures [or ambitions?] of the other" (81). In this sense, the maxim would already be "self-deconstructing," as universality must include men who might well fail to acknowledge it (while neatly reversing the prejudicial form of propositions which use expressions like "man" as quasi-inclusive points of reference). At the same time, as "interned" by its own text, the epigrammatic opening might already be taken as a majestic summary of the preoccupations of the tittle-tattling Hertfordshire crowd, what Henry Tilney of Northanger Abbey would call the "voluntary spies" (198) of Longbourn and Meryton, who no doubt reported on Bingley's financial status with even more relish than they did on the prospect of his taking up residence at Netherfield. The sentence would then function as a magisterial formulation surprised to find itself serving the cause of such "parochial" anxieties.

Less an "imposing" epigram, then, than a parody of one, the "sentence" would "save itself" by retreating into the truism guaranteed by the semantic wobble on the word "want" which mostly escapes modern readers. And, as it happens, Austen's (younger) contemporary Lord Byron also plays revealingly on its slippery sense in the opening line of Don Juan [begun 1817, the year of Jane Austen's death]: "I want a hero ... an uncommon want ..." (637); that's to say, either no one lacks heroes, or, just possibly, wants (requires or desires) them in the first place. (2)

Similarly, perhaps revealing an unexpected interest in undercutting Emma's magisterial Mr. Knightley, Austen may be implicitly contesting the majestic put-downs of this Johnsonian landowner, puncturing his patriarchal dictum to the effect...

Access from your library

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.

Source Citation


Gale Document Number: GALE|A250471427

Explore

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.
Her last impression of Darcie was a smiling face. Warmth crawled up her neck at the thought of the impression she must have given Alex.

That's your impression of me? I found out about an organisation called 'The Friends of the River Stanton'. They told me they did a special course where I could learn how to test the river water to see if it was healthy or not. So that's what I did and I got really interested in the subject. There were also action photos. One was of a bear that had climbed up a tree in a garden in Canada and refused to come down. Wildlife experts sent the bear to sleep with a special vet's gun – and a brilliant young photographer saw a great opportunity. He took a photo showing the bear falling out of the tree, fast asleep, onto a rubber mat on the ground, as if it was jumping like a gymnast!