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Performing Gentlemanliness: Social Recognition and the Making of Masculine Authority in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

*Since the emergence of feminist Austen criticism, *Pride and Prejudice* has most often been read as a novel concerned with women's agency, marriage, inheritance, and the unequal distribution of social power. These approaches have transformed our understanding of Austen's fiction, yet their emphasis on women's negotiations with patriarchal authority has left masculine authority itself comparatively underexamined, and gentlemanliness frequently appears as a stable social category rather than a contested cultural achievement. This article argues that Austen treats masculine authority as a problem of social recognition rather than inherited privilege. Focusing on Fitzwilliam Darcy, George Wickham, William Collins, and Charles Bingley, it examines how competing performances of gentlemanliness acquire, lose, and renegotiate legitimacy. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, the article demonstrates that gentlemanliness functions less as a natural consequence of class position than as a continually negotiated social practice whose authority depends upon public recognition, ethical conduct, and cultural intelligibility. Through close textual analysis, it shows that Austen repeatedly separates rank from legitimacy, exposing the instability of identities that appear socially secure. Darcy's moral development, Wickham's manipulation of reputation, Collins's dependence upon institutional authority, and Bingley's sociable masculinity collectively reveal that masculine legitimacy is never guaranteed by wealth or lineage alone. By repositioning masculine authority at the centre of Austen's social critique, the article contributes to Austen studies, masculinity studies, and contemporary discussions of gender performativity.*

Keywords: Jane Austen; *Pride and Prejudice*; masculinity; gentlemanliness; gender performativity; hegemonic masculinity; Judith Butler; Raewyn Connell.

Introduction

When Fitzwilliam Darcy first appears at the Meryton assembly, Austen introduces him through the language of distinction. Before he speaks, his reputation precedes him: he is handsome, wealthy, and connected to one of the county's most distinguished families, and his annual income becomes an object of collective fascination (Austen 11). At this moment, gentlemanliness appears inseparable from inherited privilege. By the close of the evening, Darcy has become "the proudest and most disagreeable man in the world" (Austen 13). Nothing material has changed. His fortune remains intact, his family connections unquestioned, his social status undiminished. What changes is public

recognition. A refusal to dance, an expression of social reserve, and a careless remark directed at Elizabeth Bennet fundamentally alter the way his masculinity is perceived. Austen therefore establishes, at the very beginning of the novel, a distinction that has received comparatively little sustained attention: the distinction between possessing social privilege and securing social legitimacy.

This distinction forms the central concern of the present article. Rather than asking how *Pride and Prejudice* represents masculinity, the discussion asks how the novel constructs masculine legitimacy. What enables one man to be recognised as a gentleman while another, possessing similar social advantages, fails to command respect? Why does George Wickham acquire immediate credibility despite his moral failures? Why does William Collins's institutional respectability produce ridicule instead of authority? And how does Darcy eventually recover the recognition that he loses at Meryton? These questions suggest that Austen is less interested in defining masculinity than in examining the conditions under which masculinity becomes socially intelligible. Gentlemanliness emerges not as a fixed identity but as a fragile cultural performance whose legitimacy depends upon continual acts of recognition. Public reputation, conversational exchange, moral conduct, and communal judgment all participate in determining whether masculine authority succeeds or collapses. Austen's fictional world is therefore governed not simply by class hierarchy but by the unstable relationship between social appearance and social acknowledgement.

Such a reading complicates the traditional assumption that masculine authority functions as a secure foundation within Austen's fiction. Feminist criticism has persuasively demonstrated how inheritance laws, domestic ideology, and marriage markets restrict women's autonomy (Johnson 24; Poovey 15; Kirkham 42). Those interventions remain indispensable, yet they invite a complementary question: if patriarchal authority structures women's lives, how does Austen imagine the production of patriarchal authority itself? The novel repeatedly reveals that the men who appear to occupy stable positions of power are themselves subject to judgment, misrecognition, and revision. Masculine authority, no less than feminine respectability, must be socially negotiated.

Recent work in masculinity studies offers an important framework for reconsidering this aspect of Austen's fiction. Connell argues that masculinities are historically contingent social configurations rather than universal expressions of biological difference (71). Dominant masculinities derive authority through cultural recognition and institutional reinforcement rather than through innate qualities (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Butler's theory of performativity similarly challenges essentialist understandings of identity by demonstrating that gender acquires the appearance of stability through repeated social acts that become culturally recognizable (191). Read together, these frameworks illuminate the mechanisms through which Austen's male characters acquire—or fail to acquire—the status of gentlemen.

The present article contends that *Pride and Prejudice* systematically separates gentlemanliness from inherited privilege. Through the contrasting trajectories of Darcy,

Wickham, Collins, and Bingley, Austen exposes masculine authority as a performative and ethical achievement rather than a natural consequence of class position. The novel does not reject hierarchy altogether; Darcy remains wealthy, influential, and socially distinguished. Instead, Austen revises the basis upon which authority becomes legitimate, transforming gentlemanliness from an inherited entitlement into a social accomplishment sustained through recognition, responsibility, and ethical conduct. By approaching the novel through the intertwined concepts of performativity and hegemonic masculinity, this article shifts critical attention from masculinity as a character trait to masculinity as a process of cultural production. Austen's enduring contribution lies not only in exposing the constraints imposed upon women but also in revealing the precarious foundations upon which masculine authority itself depends, anticipating contemporary debates concerning identity, recognition, and the social construction of gender.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how Austen represents gentlemanliness as a socially negotiated rather than naturally inherited form of masculine authority in *Pride and Prejudice*.
2. To investigate how public recognition, social performance, and ethical conduct shape the construction of masculine legitimacy.
3. To analyze the contrasting performances of masculinity embodied by Darcy, Wickham, Collins, and Bingley through Butler's theory of performativity and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity.
4. To demonstrate how Austen revises conventional understandings of gentlemanliness by relocating masculine authority from inherited privilege to ethical responsibility.

Research Questions

1. How does *Pride and Prejudice* distinguish between inherited social privilege and socially recognized masculine authority?
2. In what ways do the performances of Darcy, Wickham, Collins, and Bingley expose the instability of gentlemanliness as a cultural ideal?
3. How do Butler's theory of performativity and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity illuminate Austen's representation of masculine legitimacy?
4. How does Austen redefine gentlemanliness through ethical conduct, public recognition, and communal judgment?

Literature Review: Reframing Masculinity in Austen Studies

Critical discussions of *Pride and Prejudice* have traditionally been shaped by questions of gender, marriage, domestic ideology, and female agency. For more than four decades, feminist scholarship has fundamentally transformed Austen studies by demonstrating that the novel cannot be understood apart from the legal, economic, and ideological structures governing women's lives in Regency England. Rather than depicting courtship as a private romantic experience, critics have shown that Austen represents marriage as a social institution deeply entangled with inheritance, property, and patriarchal authority. Claudia L. Johnson argues that Austen's fiction participates in contemporary political debates by

exposing the moral contradictions underpinning patriarchal authority rather than simply endorsing conservative domestic values (24–29). Mary Poovey situates Austen within the ideological framework of the “proper lady,” demonstrating how feminine virtue functions as a cultural mechanism through which social order is maintained (15–31). Margaret Kirkham positions Austen within the intellectual tradition associated with Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment feminism, arguing that Austen consistently interrogates assumptions concerning women’s rationality, education, and moral agency (42–63). Collectively, these studies redirected scholarly attention from romance to ideology, establishing female subjectivity as the principal lens through which Austen’s fiction has been interpreted.

The success of feminist criticism, however, has also produced an unintended critical imbalance. While women’s negotiations with patriarchal structures have received sustained attention, masculine authority has frequently been treated as a stable background condition rather than a historically contingent cultural construction. Male characters often appear primarily in relation to female development: Darcy becomes Elizabeth Bennet’s eventual partner, Wickham functions as the deceptive suitor, Collins represents comic patriarchy, and Bingley embodies romantic generosity. Such readings illuminate the courtship narrative, yet they risk reducing male characters to narrative functions rather than examining the cultural logic through which their authority is established.

Recent scholarship has begun to challenge this imbalance. Raewyn Connell rejects essentialist understandings of masculinity, arguing that masculinities are historically specific configurations of social practice existing in hierarchical relation to one another rather than universal expressions of biological identity (67–78). Dominant forms acquire authority because they become culturally privileged and institutionally reinforced, not because they possess inherent legitimacy (Connell and Messerschmidt 832–35). Gentlemanliness therefore no longer appears as a fixed attribute naturally accompanying wealth or birth but as a historically situated ideal whose legitimacy depends upon social recognition. This perspective encourages readers to examine not merely which characters possess authority but how authority itself is culturally produced, circulated, and maintained within the novel’s social world.

Butler’s theory of performativity further complicates traditional understandings of masculine identity. Butler argues that gender does not express a pre-existing inner truth but emerges through repeated social performances that gradually acquire the appearance of naturalness (191–98). Identity is therefore less an internal essence than an effect of continual repetition, public recognition, and cultural intelligibility. Although Butler’s work has most frequently been applied to questions of femininity and queer identity, its implications extend equally to masculine subjectivity: masculinity becomes intelligible only insofar as it is repeatedly enacted according to recognizable cultural norms. Read alongside Connell, Butler reveals an important tension within Austen’s fiction. Connell explains why certain performances become socially authoritative, while Butler explains

how those performances acquire the appearance of natural identity. Together they clarify why Darcy initially fails to secure recognition despite possessing every structural advantage associated with gentlemanliness, whereas Wickham temporarily succeeds despite lacking its ethical foundations.

This theoretical shift has begun to influence contemporary Austen scholarship. Meaghan Malone argues that *Pride and Prejudice* positions masculine identity within the interpretive gaze of female observers, suggesting that gentlemanliness depends upon continual acts of evaluation rather than existing independently of social judgment (62–91). Sarah Ailwood contends that Austen's fiction encourages readers to scrutinize male conduct with the same critical attention traditionally directed toward female behaviour, repeatedly subjecting gentlemen to processes of observation, misunderstanding, correction, and revision (Ailwood 1–16). Mridula Sharma argues that *Pride and Prejudice* depicts masculinity as a negotiated cultural performance rather than a fixed social identity, emphasizing the instability of gendered expectations operating within Regency society (Sharma). Nessrine Salem Mirete's comparative study of Austen and Louisa May Alcott demonstrates that male authority is mediated through what she terms the "female gaze," suggesting that masculine legitimacy depends significantly upon women's acts of interpretation rather than male self-definition alone (Salem Mirete 4–20). Ángela Muro-Arpón's examination of Wollstonecraft's intellectual influence likewise highlights the novel's continuing engagement with gendered power, revealing how Austen's representation of authority extends beyond female oppression to interrogate the ideological foundations of patriarchal legitimacy itself (47–71).

Despite these valuable contributions, an important conceptual problem remains unresolved. Existing scholarship frequently identifies competing models of masculinity within *Pride and Prejudice*, yet comparatively little attention has been devoted to the mechanisms through which masculine legitimacy is socially produced. Critics have examined what kinds of masculinity Austen represents, but they have less frequently asked how gentlemanliness becomes recognizable in the first place. If masculinity is culturally produced rather than naturally possessed, the critical question shifts from identifying masculine types to investigating the social processes through which authority becomes intelligible. This article addresses that problem by repositioning gentlemanliness as a question of recognition rather than identity. Rather than asking whether Darcy, Wickham, Collins, or Bingley represent successful models of masculinity, it examines the cultural conditions through which their performances acquire—or fail to acquire—social legitimacy. Gentlemanliness emerges not as a stable possession secured by rank or inheritance but as a precarious social accomplishment dependent upon performance, ethical conduct, and communal recognition.

Theoretical Framework

The central claim of this article is that *Pride and Prejudice* does not merely represent different kinds of masculinity; it interrogates the cultural processes through which masculine authority becomes legitimate. Austen's novel repeatedly demonstrates that

gentlemanliness cannot be reduced to inherited wealth, family lineage, or social position. Instead, masculine authority emerges through an unstable relationship between performance, ethical conduct, and communal recognition. To account for this process, the study develops an integrated framework combining Butler's theory of gender performativity with Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, placing the two in dialogue so that each addresses the limitations of the other.

Butler's theory of performativity fundamentally challenges essentialist understandings of gender. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gender does not express a stable inner identity but is constituted through repeated social acts that gradually acquire the appearance of naturalness (191–98). What societies recognize as masculine or feminine is therefore not the manifestation of an innate essence but the effect of continual repetition within culturally regulated systems of meaning. Identity appears stable only because particular performances become familiar through repetition and are repeatedly recognized as legitimate. Gender is consequently less a condition of being than a process of becoming. This formulation shifts critical attention away from questions of authenticity toward questions of recognizability. Characters no longer possess identities independent of social interpretation; identity emerges through interaction, observation, and cultural judgment. Austen's fiction dramatizes precisely these processes: reputation is never fixed, and characters continually evaluate one another through conversation, social ritual, and public conduct. Masculine authority therefore depends not upon private intention but upon visible practices capable of securing communal recognition.

Yet Butler's framework alone cannot explain why certain performances acquire greater authority than others. If all gender identities are performed, what distinguishes socially legitimate performances from unsuccessful ones? Butler illuminates the mechanisms through which identities become intelligible, but her account requires a complementary theory capable of explaining hierarchy and institutional power. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity addresses precisely this problem. Connell argues that societies do not recognize a singular masculinity but multiple masculinities organized within hierarchical relations of power (67–78). Among these competing forms, one configuration becomes culturally dominant because it successfully secures legitimacy within existing social institutions. Hegemonic masculinity therefore refers not to the most common form of masculinity but to the form that becomes socially normative, culturally admired, and institutionally privileged (Connell and Messerschmidt 832–35).

This distinction proves especially valuable when examining Austen's representation of gentlemanliness. Regency society promoted a recognizable masculine ideal combining economic independence, education, civility, emotional restraint, moral responsibility, and social influence. Gentlemanliness functioned as the dominant model through which masculine authority became culturally intelligible. Austen repeatedly complicates this ideal, however, by demonstrating that access to privilege does not necessarily produce legitimacy. Wealth without ethical conduct becomes vulnerable to criticism; institutional position without independent judgment invites ridicule; social charm without moral

integrity ultimately collapses under sustained scrutiny. Gentlemanliness therefore appears not as a secure social identity but as an unstable cultural ideal requiring continual negotiation.

Bringing Butler and Connell together enables a more comprehensive reading of Austen's novel than either framework can provide independently. Butler explains how masculine identities become socially recognizable through repeated performance, while Connell explains why certain performances become culturally authoritative. Their combined application reveals that gentlemanliness in *Pride and Prejudice* is simultaneously performative and hierarchical: masculinity must first become intelligible through recognizable conduct before it can acquire the legitimacy associated with hegemonic authority. This synthesis also clarifies the relationship between the novel's principal male characters. Darcy, Wickham, Collins, and Bingley do not simply represent four contrasting personalities; they embody competing negotiations of gentlemanliness within a shared cultural framework. Darcy initially possesses structural authority but fails to perform sociability; Wickham performs gentlemanliness convincingly despite lacking its ethical substance; Collins mistakes institutional conformity for legitimate authority; Bingley demonstrates that sociability alone cannot guarantee decisive leadership. Austen's interest therefore lies not in identifying an ideal masculinity but in examining how different performances succeed or fail within the mechanisms of social recognition.

Recent developments in masculinity studies further reinforce this approach. Messerschmidt's reformulation of hegemonic masculinity emphasizes its dynamic and relational character, arguing that masculine authority is continually reconstructed through changing social practices rather than permanently secured by institutional structures. Sharma demonstrates that Austen presents masculinity as a negotiated cultural performance whose legitimacy depends upon interaction rather than biological determinism, while Ailwood argues that Austen consistently subjects male authority to public scrutiny, exposing gentlemanliness as a category open to evaluation rather than beyond criticism (Ailwood 1–16). The framework developed here therefore rests upon a single proposition: gentlemanliness in *Pride and Prejudice* is neither inherited nor naturally possessed. It is culturally produced through repeated performances that must continually secure social recognition while conforming to historically privileged models of masculine conduct.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in close textual reading and informed by contemporary literary theory. Its primary objective is not to reconstruct historical realities of Regency England but to examine how Austen's narrative produces meaning through language, characterization, social interaction, and narrative structure. The primary corpus consists of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), examined through the Penguin Classics edition edited by Vivien Jones. The analysis focuses principally on Darcy, Wickham, Collins, and Bingley—not because they represent isolated psychological types but because they collectively expose competing models of gentlemanliness operating

within the novel's social world. Each character functions as a site through which questions of authority, recognition, performance, and legitimacy are negotiated. Methodologically, the study employs close reading as its principal analytical strategy, attending to Austen's diction, narrative perspective, dialogue, irony, and symbolic social practices. Rather than summarizing plot events, the analysis investigates how specific scenes generate broader cultural meanings. Particular emphasis is placed upon episodes that publicly stage masculine identity: the Meryton assembly, Wickham's account of Darcy, Collins's proposal to Elizabeth, Darcy's first proposal and explanatory letter, the visit to Pemberley, and Darcy's intervention in Lydia Bennet's elopement. These scenes are examined not simply because they advance the narrative but because they function as moments in which gentlemanliness is publicly enacted, evaluated, contested, and revised. The analysis proceeds according to a problem-oriented rather than character-oriented structure, organized around four interrelated critical problems: the failure of gentlemanly recognition, the relationship between visibility and masculine performance, the limitations of institutional authority, and the ethical revision of gentlemanliness. Butler's concept of performativity and Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity function as heuristic rather than prescriptive frameworks; textual patterns identified through close reading are interpreted with the assistance of gender theory, allowing theoretical concepts to emerge in response to Austen's narrative rather than directing interpretation from the outset. Secondary scholarship performs a complementary function, engaged dialogically rather than as contextual background: foundational feminist criticism provides the historical basis for understanding Austen's engagement with gender and domestic ideology (Johnson; Kirkham; Poovey), while recent contributions to masculinity studies and Austen criticism situate the present argument within ongoing scholarly conversations (Ailwood; Malone; Sharma; Messerschmidt; Salem Mirete; Muro-Arpón). The methodology also recognizes the limitations inherent in literary interpretation: it does not claim that Austen consciously anticipated twentieth- or twenty-first-century gender theory. Butler and Connell are employed as contemporary critical vocabularies capable of illuminating dynamics already present within the novel, and every major analytical claim is grounded in close engagement with Austen's language and narrative development.

Analysis

1. The Failure of Gentlemanly Recognition

Austen's first sustained representation of masculinity unfolds not through introspection but through public performance. Before readers are invited to evaluate Darcy's character, they witness others evaluating him. This narrative strategy relocates masculine authority from the private realm of individual identity to the public sphere of social interpretation. The Meryton assembly is therefore more than an introductory social gathering; it functions as the novel's first arena of judgment, where gentlemanliness is not assumed but tested. Darcy's entrance initially appears to confirm traditional assumptions. Austen records the collective response: he is "looked at with great admiration," and his "fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien," together with the report of his "ten thousand a year,"

establish him as an object of immediate public esteem (Austen 11). Before Darcy utters a single sentence, his body, wealth, and lineage have been translated into signs of gentlemanly authority. Reputation precedes personality, and social privilege appears sufficient to produce masculine legitimacy.

Austen dismantles this assumption almost immediately. The same community that welcomes Darcy as the embodiment of gentlemanliness quickly condemns him after observing his conduct. His refusal to dance, reluctance to converse with strangers, and dismissive remark concerning Elizabeth transform admiration into hostility. By the end of the evening he is remembered not as an eligible gentleman but as “the proudest and most disagreeable man in the world” (Austen 13). Nothing material has altered; the only change is interpretive. His conduct has failed to satisfy the expectations attached to his social position. This distinction establishes the central problem of the novel: Austen separates social privilege from social legitimacy. Gentlemanliness cannot simply be inherited through property or family name; it must be recognised through culturally intelligible behaviour. Inherited status may provide access to authority, but it cannot guarantee its acceptance.

The symbolic importance of dancing intensifies this argument. Within Regency culture, the ballroom functioned as one of the principal spaces through which civility, courtship, and social refinement were publicly enacted. Dancing constituted a ritualized performance of social competence, demonstrating politeness, emotional discipline, and respect for communal expectations; refusal therefore carried meanings extending beyond individual preference. Darcy’s unwillingness to dance disrupts the very ceremony through which gentlemanliness becomes publicly visible. Since Elizabeth herself recognizes dance as a medium of communication, wit, and mutual recognition, his refusal is interpreted not as shyness but as arrogance; by declining participation, he inadvertently undermines the cultural performance expected of a gentleman.

Butler’s concept of performativity offers a particularly illuminating framework for this episode. Butler argues that identities acquire coherence through repeated acts that become culturally recognisable rather than through the expression of an inner essence (191). A performance succeeds only insofar as it can be interpreted within existing cultural conventions. Darcy’s wealth and lineage possess no inherent social meaning until translated into recognizable forms of behaviour; because his actions fail to correspond with communal expectations of gentlemanly sociability, his masculine authority becomes unintelligible.

Importantly, Austen does not suggest that the community’s judgment is objectively correct. Rather, she demonstrates that recognition itself possesses material consequences regardless of its accuracy. Elizabeth’s assessment emerges from observable behaviour rather than privileged knowledge: she hears Darcy dismiss her as “tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (Austen 12), witnesses his reserve, and concludes that his pride reflects his character. Austen therefore privileges perception over interiority. Readers know no more about Darcy than Elizabeth does; like the inhabitants of Meryton, they

must construct his identity through performance rather than essence. Gentlemanliness becomes an effect of observation, conversation, and public judgment rather than an intrinsic personal quality.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity clarifies why Darcy's failure is so consequential. Hegemonic masculinity derives authority because it becomes culturally recognised as the normative model of legitimate manhood (Connell 76), and such authority depends not merely upon structural privilege but upon successful embodiment of socially valued practices. Within Regency England, the gentleman was expected to display civility, self-command, generosity, and public responsibility alongside wealth and education. Darcy possesses the structural foundations of hegemonic masculinity but initially fails to perform its behavioural expectations, and Austen thus exposes a crucial distinction between occupying a privileged social position and successfully inhabiting its cultural role. Sharma argues that Austen's male characters negotiate masculinity through socially visible performances rather than fixed personal identities, while Ailwood observes that Austen repeatedly subjects male behaviour to public scrutiny, destabilising assumptions that masculine authority exists independently of evaluation.

The narrative irony of the assembly lies in the discrepancy between appearance and ethical potential. Readers later discover that Darcy possesses many of the virtues absent in Wickham, yet Austen refuses to reveal these qualities prematurely. Instead, she insists that social authority must first pass through the unstable medium of public recognition. Darcy is not secretly recognised as a gentleman despite public misunderstanding; he must gradually earn the recognition denied to him at Meryton through transformed conduct. The assembly therefore establishes recognition as the decisive condition of gentlemanly authority. The remainder of *Pride and Prejudice* may be understood as an extended response to the question first posed at Meryton: How does a man become recognisable as a gentleman? The answer, Austen suggests, lies not in what he possesses but in how his conduct becomes intelligible, credible, and ethically persuasive within the social world he inhabits.

2. Visibility, Reputation, and Masculine Performance

If the Meryton assembly establishes that gentlemanliness depends upon public recognition, George Wickham demonstrates how that recognition may be manufactured. Austen introduces Wickham only after Darcy's reputation has begun to deteriorate, ensuring that readers encounter the two men within a shared economy of comparison. Wickham's appearance transforms the novel from an inquiry into failed recognition into an exploration of how masculine legitimacy can be strategically produced through visibility, narrative control, and social performance. Rather than presenting reputation as a transparent reflection of moral character, Austen reveals it to be a cultural construction shaped by storytelling, communal desire, and interpretive expectation.

Wickham's entrance contrasts sharply with Darcy's first appearance. Whereas Darcy arrives surrounded by admiration that quickly dissolves into suspicion, Wickham immediately commands sympathy through effortless sociability. Austen describes him as

possessing “all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address” (Austen 71). Unlike Darcy, whose reserve interrupts social interaction, Wickham actively cultivates it: he speaks easily, participates confidently, and demonstrates an instinctive awareness of how impressions are formed. He is introduced not simply as a handsome officer but as a figure who understands the mechanics of public recognition. This distinction is crucial because Wickham’s authority derives less from social position than from narrative visibility. He possesses neither Darcy’s wealth nor his landed status. Instead, he acquires legitimacy by controlling the stories through which others interpret him. His account of Darcy’s supposed injustice is carefully structured to produce sympathy: he presents himself as a wronged man deprived of opportunities that rightfully belonged to him, while Darcy becomes the privileged aggressor whose arrogance confirms the community’s existing prejudices (Austen 78–82). Wickham’s narrative succeeds because it appears emotionally coherent and aligns with what his audience already wishes to believe. Austen thereby exposes an important feature of social authority: reputation often depends less upon factual accuracy than upon narrative plausibility. Darcy has already been recognized as proud; Wickham merely provides an explanation that appears to confirm existing perceptions. Recognition therefore functions cumulatively: once an identity becomes publicly intelligible, subsequent evidence is interpreted in ways that reinforce it. Reputations rarely emerge from isolated actions; they are sustained through narrative repetition and communal circulation.

Elizabeth’s response illustrates the persuasive power of this process. Her willingness to believe Wickham is often attributed to personal prejudice, yet Austen presents a more complex dynamic. Elizabeth does not merely accept his story because she dislikes Darcy; she accepts it because Wickham performs sincerity with remarkable consistency. His conversational ease, emotional restraint, and apparent reluctance to speak ill of another gentleman create an impression of authenticity that exceeds the factual content of his narrative. Credibility itself is performative: trust arises not simply from evidence but from the successful enactment of recognizable signs of honesty.

Butler’s theory clarifies the significance of Wickham’s success. Identities acquire authority through repeated performances recognized as culturally intelligible rather than through any essential truth (191–98). Wickham does not merely claim the identity of a gentleman; he repeatedly performs the gestures, language, and emotional dispositions associated with gentlemanliness until those performances become socially persuasive. His masculinity is not deceptive because it is performed but persuasive because it is performed successfully. Yet Austen also reveals a limitation within performativity when divorced from ethical consistency. Because performances must be continually reiterated, they remain vulnerable to interruption and reinterpretation. Wickham’s gentlemanly persona depends upon maintaining coherence between appearance and public expectation; once his conduct contradicts the identity he has constructed, the performance becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. His attempted elopement with Georgiana Darcy, his financial irresponsibility, and finally his relationship with Lydia Bennet expose fractures within the narrative that

previously secured his legitimacy (Austen 188–91; 268–74). Recognition may be manufactured, but it cannot be indefinitely insulated from ethical conduct.

Connell's concept deepens this analysis by distinguishing between cultural visibility and legitimate authority. Wickham performs many outward signs associated with hegemonic masculinity—confidence, charm, physical attractiveness, military bearing, conversational fluency—and these qualities allow him temporary access to the prestige attached to gentlemanliness. Yet hegemonic masculinity is sustained not merely through appearance but through institutional and moral legitimacy (Connell and Messerschmidt 832–35). Wickham imitates the visible language of hegemonic masculinity without embodying the ethical responsibilities through which that authority is ultimately maintained. The novel's treatment of military identity reinforces this critique: in Regency Britain the uniform symbolized honour, discipline, and patriotic service, enabling officers to command immediate social respect, and Austen exploits these associations while questioning them. Wickham benefits from the symbolic authority attached to his profession, yet his conduct repeatedly undermines the virtues the uniform is presumed to represent. The officer's commission becomes another performative resource through which masculine legitimacy is staged, and Austen's satire extends beyond individual deception to encompass the institutional symbols that facilitate social recognition. Malone argues that Wickham's appeal depends upon the interpretive gaze through which female observers evaluate masculine conduct (62–91), and Salem Mirete similarly contends that Austen locates masculine authority within processes of female observation, destabilising assumptions that masculinity can exist independently of external judgment (4–20).

Equally significant is Austen's refusal to construct a simple opposition between authentic and inauthentic masculinity. Wickham's failure does not prove that performance is inherently deceptive, nor does Darcy's eventual success reveal an authentic identity concealed beneath appearance. Such a binary would undermine the novel's interrogation of gentlemanliness. Instead, Austen suggests that all masculine authority is necessarily performative because it depends upon public recognition. The critical distinction lies elsewhere: some performances remain capable of sustaining ethical scrutiny, while others collapse once conduct and reputation diverge. This becomes evident after Darcy's explanatory letter, which does not merely expose Wickham's dishonesty but reorganizes the interpretive framework through which his previous performances are understood. Elizabeth does not receive entirely new evidence so much as a new context for interpreting familiar behaviour. Wickham's charm remains unchanged, but its meaning alters dramatically. Reputation is not a fixed possession but an interpretive achievement continually revised through competing narratives. Wickham's trajectory therefore reveals that masculine authority is inseparable from visibility: gentlemanliness exists only insofar as it can be publicly recognized, narrated, and affirmed. Yet visibility alone is insufficient. Performance may secure admiration, but enduring legitimacy requires ethical consistency capable of sustaining recognition over time.

3. Institutional Authority and Masculine Legibility

If Wickham demonstrates how masculine authority may be fabricated through charismatic performance, William Collins exposes a different weakness within the cultural logic of gentlemanliness. Collins does not seek legitimacy through charm or narrative control; he attempts to secure it through institutional affiliation. His identity is constructed almost entirely around the offices he occupies, the hierarchy he serves, and the authority he borrows from others. Through Collins, Austen asks whether institutional position alone can produce gentlemanly legitimacy, and her answer is consistently negative: institutional authority may confer respectability, but it cannot by itself generate recognition.

Collins enters the novel already defined by institutions. He is a clergyman, the legal heir to Longbourn, and the dependent protégé of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. These positions appear superficially to embody many of the social markers associated with respectable masculinity in Regency England: the Church of England, landed inheritance, and aristocratic patronage represented powerful cultural institutions through which masculine authority was publicly organised. Collins therefore occupies positions that should establish him as an exemplary gentleman. Austen immediately destabilises this expectation by revealing the discrepancy between institutional status and personal authority.

From his first appearance, Collins speaks less as an independent individual than as a representative of institutional discourse. His language is remarkably derivative, and conversations repeatedly return to Lady Catherine, whose opinions become the measure of his own judgment. Whether discussing architecture, household management, education, or marriage, he rarely advances an original perspective; he reproduces the values of his patron almost verbatim, treating her preferences as objective truths rather than subjective opinions (Austen 89–93). His speech becomes an act of repetition rather than interpretation. Collins mistakes institutional proximity for personal authority, assuming that legitimacy naturally accompanies his clerical office and aristocratic patronage. Yet recognition requires more than office; it requires independent judgment capable of commanding respect. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity illuminates this failure: hegemonic masculinity derives authority through culturally legitimate practices supported by institutions such as education, religion, property, and law (Connell 74–78), but institutional affiliation alone does not constitute it, since authority must be continually enacted in ways that sustain cultural legitimacy.

The satire becomes particularly evident during Collins's proposal to Elizabeth. Structurally, the proposal resembles a formal declaration rather than an intimate conversation. Collins begins not by expressing affection but by explaining why marriage is advantageous for a clergyman, presenting three carefully ordered reasons: marriage will provide an appropriate example for his parish, increase his personal happiness, and fulfil Lady Catherine's recommendation that he marry (Austen 105–08). Elizabeth occupies a surprisingly marginal position within this reasoning; she appears less as an individual than as the final component required to complete an already determined social script. The language of the proposal is dominated by obligation, propriety, duty, and patronage, with

emotional reciprocity largely absent. Even Elizabeth's repeated refusals fail to interrupt the logic governing his performance: convinced that women naturally reject first proposals out of modesty, Collins interprets her objections as conventional gestures rather than genuine expressions of agency (Austen 109–10). His inability to recognise her perspective exposes the rigidity of his masculine identity. Because his understanding of social interaction depends entirely upon inherited conventions, he proves incapable of responding to situations that fall outside predetermined institutional expectations.

Butler's theory of performativity helps explain why this performance repeatedly fails. Identity is constituted through repetition, yet repetition never guarantees successful recognition (191–98); performances must remain responsive to the social contexts in which they occur. Collins demonstrates the opposite tendency, his masculinity consisting of excessive repetition detached from situational awareness. Rather than adapting institutional norms to particular circumstances, he reproduces them mechanically, and consequently the performance becomes visible as performance. Readers no longer perceive a convincing gentleman but a man overwhelmed by the very scripts intended to establish his authority. Austen's comedy arises not because Collins violates social conventions but because he obeys them too completely. His exaggerated deference exposes the artificiality of the institutional codes governing gentlemanliness, and every reference to Lady Catherine reminds readers that his authority is borrowed rather than earned.

Ailwood argues that Austen consistently subjects masculine authority to public evaluation, refusing to treat social position as self-legitimizing; Collins exemplifies this process because his clerical office never shields him from criticism (1–16). Sharma similarly observes that masculine legitimacy in *Pride and Prejudice* depends upon negotiation rather than simple possession, and Collins's failure demonstrates that offices and titles cannot compensate for deficiencies in judgment, empathy, or self-awareness. Collins also illuminates a distinction between authority and legibility: Austen repeatedly asks not merely who possesses authority but who appears authoritative. Collins occupies socially powerful positions, yet his behaviour prevents others from recognising him as genuinely authoritative, and his masculinity remains legible only as imitation.

The contrast between Collins and Darcy sharpens Austen's critique. Both men occupy privileged social positions, yet their trajectories differ profoundly. Darcy eventually acquires recognition by revising his conduct, whereas Collins remains imprisoned within institutional formulas that discourage reflection and adaptation. Austen thereby distinguishes inherited position from ethical authority: social structures may provide opportunities for recognition, but they cannot determine its outcome. Collins's marriage to Charlotte Lucas reinforces this argument. Charlotte approaches the union pragmatically, recognising marriage as an economic necessity rather than a romantic ideal (Austen 122–27), while Collins interprets it primarily as institutional fulfilment. Their relationship functions less as an emotional partnership than as the successful completion of social expectations, and Austen presents it as evidence that institutional conformity may produce social stability without generating personal or moral authority. Collins becomes

a respectable husband, yet he never becomes a persuasive gentleman. Ultimately, he represents Austen's most sustained critique of institutional masculinity: if Darcy initially fails because privilege lacks recognition, and Wickham succeeds temporarily because performance exceeds ethical substance, Collins demonstrates that institutional power without independent judgment produces neither admiration nor authority.

4. Ethical Masculinity and the Revision of Gentlemanliness

The preceding analyses have demonstrated that *Pride and Prejudice* dismantles three dominant assumptions concerning masculine authority. Through the Meryton assembly, Austen separates gentlemanliness from inherited privilege; through Wickham, she reveals the persuasive yet unstable power of performance; through Collins, she exposes the inadequacy of institutional authority detached from independent judgment. Yet the novel does not conclude with the simple rejection of gentlemanliness as an ideological construct. Instead, Austen reconstructs it. Darcy's transformation represents not the discovery of an authentic masculinity concealed beneath appearances but the gradual revision of masculine authority itself. Gentlemanliness is neither abandoned nor merely redeemed; it is ethically redefined.

Darcy's first proposal marks the decisive crisis in this process. Unlike the Meryton assembly, where his failure arises from social misrecognition, the proposal confronts him with moral recognition. Darcy believes that his declaration of love should overcome the social inequalities separating him and Elizabeth, yet the language through which he expresses that love reveals the persistence of inherited privilege. He repeatedly reminds Elizabeth of the "inferiority of her connections" and the struggle he has endured in overcoming his family's objections (Austen 185–87). What Darcy intends as emotional sincerity is received as an assertion of social superiority. Elizabeth's refusal therefore constitutes far more than a rejection of marriage; it dismantles the assumptions supporting Darcy's understanding of masculine authority. Her accusation is uncompromising: "Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner" (Austen 190). This statement occupies a pivotal position within the novel because it separates gentlemanliness from rank with remarkable precision. Elizabeth does not question Darcy's wealth, education, or family background; she questions whether his conduct deserves the title of gentleman at all. Austen thus relocates gentlemanliness from inherited status to ethical behaviour. The significance of this moment lies in its reversal of authority. Throughout much of the novel, Darcy possesses the structural advantages associated with Regency masculinity, and Elizabeth possesses none of them. Yet within the proposal scene she becomes the moral evaluator of gentlemanliness itself. Austen temporarily suspends social hierarchy in favour of ethical judgment, allowing masculine legitimacy to be determined not by birth but by conduct.

Darcy's response distinguishes him fundamentally from Wickham and Collins. Both earlier figures encounter challenges to their authority, yet neither responds through genuine self-examination: Wickham protects his reputation through further deception, and Collins retreats into institutional certainty, refusing to acknowledge Elizabeth's

autonomy. Darcy alone accepts criticism as an opportunity for revision. His explanatory letter does not merely defend his past actions; it initiates a process of ethical reflection, beginning not with self-justification but with the recognition that he has been compelled to reconsider himself through Elizabeth's judgment (Austen 193–201). Butler's understanding of performativity illuminates why this episode represents more than personal development. Identity remains open to repetition, disruption, and revision rather than existing as a completed essence (192–95). Darcy's transformation exemplifies such revision: the gentleman who emerges later in the novel is not revealed as the authentic self hidden beneath earlier behaviour. Rather, a new form of gentlemanliness is produced through revised performances of responsibility, humility, and social attentiveness. Identity changes because conduct changes.

Austen carefully represents this transformation through action rather than declaration. When Elizabeth visits Pemberley, she encounters a Darcy whose behaviour contrasts sharply with his earlier reserve: his welcome is marked by courtesy rather than distance, attentiveness rather than superiority, and generosity rather than condescension (Austen 235–41). Importantly, Austen avoids suggesting that Darcy has abandoned his dignity or social position. He remains the master of Pemberley, yet his authority is now exercised differently. Power has not disappeared; it has been ethically reoriented. Pemberley itself reinforces this revision of masculinity. Critics have often interpreted the estate as a symbol of Darcy's character, but Austen's description extends beyond the familiar association between landscape and personality. The estate reflects a mode of stewardship rather than possession: Elizabeth observes that everything appears managed with care, moderation, and responsibility (Austen 233–35). The moral significance of Pemberley therefore lies not in its grandeur but in the manner of its governance. Masculine authority becomes inseparable from ethical responsibility toward others; ownership alone no longer constitutes gentlemanliness, responsible administration does.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity clarifies the broader implications of this transformation. Hegemonic masculinity is never static but must continually reproduce its legitimacy through socially valued practices (Connell 76; Connell and Messerschmidt 834). Darcy's development illustrates precisely such a reconfiguration. The structural foundations of his authority—wealth, education, property, and lineage—remain unchanged; what changes is the basis upon which these privileges acquire legitimacy. Austen redefines hegemonic masculinity by insisting that authority must be accompanied by humility, accountability, and moral responsibility. Privilege without ethical conduct ceases to deserve recognition.

The Lydia Bennet episode provides the strongest evidence for this revised model of gentlemanliness. Darcy's intervention differs fundamentally from Wickham's earlier performances because it initially occurs beyond public visibility. He arranges Lydia's marriage, resolves the family's financial difficulties, and protects the Bennets from lasting social disgrace without seeking immediate recognition (Austen 286–301); his actions remain concealed until Mrs. Gardiner reveals the truth. Austen thereby introduces an

important distinction between performance and display. Darcy continues to perform gentlemanliness, yet he no longer performs it for admiration. Ethical conduct itself becomes the performance through which legitimacy is ultimately secured.

This distinction addresses a potential criticism of Butler's framework. If masculinity is performative, does ethical action merely become another performance? Austen's answer appears more nuanced. She does not oppose performance to sincerity; rather, she demonstrates that performances acquire different moral meanings according to the intentions, responsibilities, and social consequences accompanying them. Wickham performs in order to secure admiration, Collins in order to reproduce institutional authority, and Darcy in order to fulfil ethical obligations. The difference lies not in the existence of performance but in its ethical orientation. Messerschmidt argues that contemporary understandings of hegemonic masculinity must recognize the relational and historically adaptive nature of masculine authority, emphasizing accountability rather than domination. Sharma similarly observes that Austen's male characters negotiate masculinity through changing social expectations rather than fixed patriarchal identities, and Ailwood demonstrates that Austen repeatedly subjects male authority to ethical scrutiny (1–16). Darcy's transformation exemplifies these insights by illustrating how masculine legitimacy must be repeatedly earned rather than permanently possessed.

The final proposal scene completes this revision of gentlemanliness. Unlike the first proposal, Darcy no longer speaks from the position of inherited entitlement. The language of superiority has disappeared, and conversation now proceeds through mutual respect rather than hierarchical assumption. Elizabeth's acceptance signifies more than romantic fulfilment; it represents communal recognition that Darcy's authority has acquired ethical legitimacy. Their marriage does not restore the social order established at the beginning of the novel; instead, it confirms that social order itself has been morally redefined. Importantly, Austen does not present Darcy as a flawless ideal. His authority remains situated within the inequalities of Regency society, and he continues to benefit from wealth, property, and class privilege. The novel does not imagine a world without hierarchy; rather, it insists that hierarchy alone cannot justify authority. Gentlemanliness must continually prove itself through conduct capable of sustaining recognition. Privilege survives, but only after passing through ethical evaluation.

Darcy's development therefore resolves the central question posed at the Meryton assembly. At the beginning of the novel, recognition depended largely upon appearance; by the conclusion, it depends upon sustained ethical practice. Austen has neither rejected gentlemanliness nor accepted it uncritically—she has transformed it. Masculine authority emerges not as an inherited possession but as a social achievement requiring continual negotiation between privilege, responsibility, and communal judgment. The gentleman is not the man who possesses the greatest wealth, the highest rank, or the strongest institutional authority, nor simply the man who performs sociability most convincingly, but the individual whose conduct continually justifies the authority society grants him.

Conclusion

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen persistently questions the assumptions through which gentlemanliness acquires cultural authority. Rather than presenting masculine identity as a natural consequence of birth, wealth, or social position, the novel reveals that masculine legitimacy is continually negotiated through public performance, ethical conduct, and communal recognition. By examining the contrasting trajectories of Fitzwilliam Darcy, George Wickham, William Collins, and Charles Bingley, this article has argued that Austen relocates gentlemanliness from inherited privilege to socially recognised responsibility. Masculine authority emerges not as a stable possession but as an achievement that must repeatedly justify itself before the interpretive judgments of others.

The analysis has demonstrated that each of Austen's principal male characters exposes a different limitation within conventional understandings of gentlemanliness. Darcy's initial failure at the Meryton assembly illustrates that inherited privilege cannot guarantee recognition. Wickham's temporary success reveals how reputation may be constructed through persuasive performance while remaining ethically unstable. Collins exposes the inadequacy of institutional authority detached from independent judgment, demonstrating that social office alone cannot produce legitimate masculinity. Finally, Darcy's transformation reconstructs gentlemanliness as an ethical practice grounded in humility, accountability, and responsible action rather than entitlement.

Reading the novel through Butler's theory of performativity and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has enabled a reconsideration of these developments without reducing Austen's fiction to an illustration of contemporary theory. Butler provides a vocabulary for understanding how masculine identity becomes socially intelligible through repeated acts of recognition, while Connell explains why particular performances acquire cultural legitimacy within hierarchical social structures (Butler 191–98; Connell 67–78; Connell and Messerschmidt 832–35). Together, these frameworks illuminate Austen's sustained interrogation of masculine authority as a historically contingent and culturally negotiated phenomenon.

More significantly, this study suggests that *Pride and Prejudice* contributes to broader debates concerning the social construction of authority. Although the novel is often celebrated for its representation of female agency and its critique of patriarchal limitations, Austen simultaneously subjects masculine power itself to rigorous ethical examination. Gentlemanliness is neither assumed nor celebrated uncritically; it becomes an object of continual scrutiny. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that authority derives its legitimacy not from inherited privilege but from conduct capable of sustaining public trust. In this respect, Austen anticipates contemporary understandings of identity as relational, performative, and dependent upon recognition rather than essence. The enduring relevance of *Pride and Prejudice* therefore lies not only in its exploration of courtship or domestic ideology but also in its sophisticated understanding of power as a social achievement. Masculinity, like all forms of authority, remains vulnerable to interpretation,

revision, and ethical evaluation. Austen's gentlemen do not simply possess authority; they must continually earn it. By exposing this instability, *Pride and Prejudice* transforms gentlemanliness from a symbol of unquestioned social privilege into an ethical ideal whose legitimacy depends upon the relationship between individual conduct and collective judgment.

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