Title of Paper: **Conforming Rebels and Rebellious Conformists: Shared Comic Style in Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde’s Marriage Satire**
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Abstract:

Despite differences in gender, chosen genre, intended audience and comic purpose, Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde are more similar than different in their modes of subversive humor and in the themes they employ to satirize marriage. In attempting to answer what Austen and Wilde’s marriage satire consists of stylistically, I will address how the writers employ irony, wit, paradox and comic characterization. Their use of parody and sometimes contempt for the objects of their satire will also be addressed. In dissecting humorous texts to look at social critique hidden behind wit, I found that what words lose in humor, they gained in acquiring alternate meanings.

Keywords: Austen, Wilde, Irony, Paradox, Oxymoron, Literary Humor

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Even though Austen and Wilde share a comic spirit and draw on similar comic themes, they differ in their major comic technique. Paradox is Wilde’s major comic technique and at the heart of his wit. In this way he differs from Austen, whose major comic technique is irony. In “The Truth In Masks” Wilde states that “A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (99). The fact that paradox is central to Wilde’s comedy is no surprise because paradox, with its ability to draw attention and place emphasis, is a common tool in epigrammatic writing. Dariusz Pestka defines paradoxical writing as writing that employs “the irony of reversal” where “the statement itself carries a context which contradicts [its] words” (176). Wilde thrives on the seemingly self-contradictory or absurd statement that usually contains a truth contrary to received opinion. Each of his witty paradoxical statements “is achieved by the fitting of the absurd word into the [normal] context” (ibid 181). In fact, most of the witty remarks in his plays are paradoxes, giving the feeling of the absurd to his works. For example, on the subject of love and marriage, Wilde asserts that “divorces
are made in heaven” *(The Importance of Being Earnest* 323) and that love is easily killed *(Lady Windermere’s Fan* 427) but “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance” *(An Ideal Husband* 522). These hilarious paradoxical sayings are epigrammatic in that they convey their message with concise clarity and pointed polish.

Neil Sammells asserts that “Wilde’s reversals and paradoxes do not simply preserve the dominant ideological terms he engages with, but they deconstruct them” (2). Wilde preserves his society’s ideology by writing his comedies in a popular style that combines comedy with melodrama. He deconstructs this same ideology through social satire. Wilde employs paradox to satirize marriage in several ways. One way is by creating a discrepancy between the moral tone of an epigram and amoral treatment of the subject: “The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public” *(The Importance of Being Earnest* 327). Wilde also reverses proverbs and clichés for a paradoxically humorous effect, as in “washing one’s *clean* linen in public” or when Lady Bracknell asserts that “The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life” (ibid 382). There is a double paradox here: one reverses the cliché of a man of war being gentle when at home; the second reverses the usual belief about soldiers, who Lady Bracknell describes as essentially peaceful.

Here, and throughout the play, Lady Bracknell, in attempting to support social conventions, ends by compromising them.

Another type of Wildean paradox shocks “with the unexpected contradiction, embodied in a traditionally respected concept”:
LADY BRACKNELL. I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I
hadn’t been there since her poor husband’s death. I never saw a
woman so altered. She looks quite twenty years younger.

ALGERNON. I heard her hair has turned quite gold from grief. (ibid
328)

Here Lady Bracknell’s first three sentences give a clichéd description of a woman’s
reaction to the death of her husband, with the paradox appearing in the fourth
sentence. Algernon’s response is paradoxical more briefly.

Wilde also employs oxymoron when structuring his paradoxes. Oxymoron is
suited to Wilde’s paradoxical expression because it merges contradictory ideas quite
concisely. When Lady Bracknell refuses to consent to Jack and Gwendolyn’s
marriage, Jack states that he will not consent to Algernon and Cecily’s union,
asserting that “a passionate celibacy is all that any of us can look forward to” (ibid
377 emphasis added).

Wilde’s wit, his expert phraseology expressed through paradoxes that include
surprising comparisons and contrasts is evident in practically every line of his plays.
Countless examples abound and many of his characters, both male and female, are
identified as “wits.” These wits are intelligent people who are able to form skillful
plays upon words. Wilde employs wit to satirize marriage many times. For example,
when Lord Goring, the “reformed” rake, proposes, he vows to be “an ideal husband;”
his lady pertly answers: “An ideal husband!...Oh, I don’t think I should like that. It
sounds like something in the next world” (An Ideal Husband 551). In A Woman of No
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*Importance* the women wittily decide that an “ideal husband” is one who “is to do nothing but pay bills and compliments” (447).

Paradoxically, almost every character contradicts him or herself through word or deed, making it impossible to take any character seriously. Characters perform for each other in Wilde’s comedies. He gives the sense that human beings are mostly superficial, hence his “flat” characters; he is self-reflexive, writing stylized dialogue. For example, in an early draft of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* Mrs. Erlynne dismisses Lord Windermere’s disapproval of her unmarried lifestyle: “I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels and silly French plays” (qtd. in Powell 26). Here Wilde’s character is self-reflexively referring to the melodramatic novels and plays that Wilde drew from for his work. In the final edition of the play a comment is made that Mrs. Erlynne is “like an *edition de luxe* of a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market” (ibid), a comment that can be attributed to the play itself. Sammells notices that Wilde’s comedy shows “a self-reflective concern with its own surfaces...and a pervasive fascination with presenting identity as surface – hence indeterminate, slippery, reversible” (4). Austen on the other hand, is not usually self-reflexive. She does not purposely draw attention to the fictional nature of her work because she wants the audience to believe in the realism of what her characters are saying.

Wilde’s major comic technique is paradox, but he employs irony as well. Irony is Austen’s major comic technique. In fact, within the marriage plot, both authors employ irony in order to show the difference between what is and what may or should
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be. One way Austen and Wilde do this is through ironic characterization. By having irony as her major comic technique, Austen follows her favorite influence, Samuel Johnson. She makes humorous, understated pronouncements on the condition of humankind, such as when she asserts that “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (*Pride and Prejudice* 1).

Austen and Wilde’s work includes what I call “conforming rebels,” characters who defy social mores, although they may seem to initially conform to them. For example, as a dutiful daughter, sister and neighbor, Elizabeth proves defiant by refusing Mr. Collins, although she has no other prospects in sight. By having one of her most attractive heroines insist on marrying for love, Austen, like many writers who followed her, including Wilde, is quite modern in placing individual wishes over those of family and community despite the fact that marriage itself is a conventional comic ending. Austen gives her readers a happy ending culminating in marriage, in which the heroine seems to conform to social mores by giving up some of her independence in becoming a wife. On the other hand, Elizabeth holds out for a love match, disregarding her mother’s wishes and those of a materialistic society. Instead of marrying for convenience, she risks spinsterhood in order to adhere to her personal belief that one should marry for love.

Austen’s comedies climax with the protagonist’s internal recognition, a dialogue with the self in which self-understanding is (usually ironically) reached. In all of Austen’s novels, the protagonists must come to self-realization before they can understand others’ motives, facilitate change within themselves and be worthy of
The Victorian marriage. For example, in Emma, unlike Austen’s other novels, all social obstacles to marriage and happiness are within the heroine herself. Emma must change before she marries Mr. Knightley. This happens in a climactic scene depicted in highly emotional, dramatic language. In the carriage after the ball, Emma realizes that without self-knowledge there cannot be a knowledge of others. Only when she humorously “realized that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself” (Emma 414) does Emma understand how wrong she had been regarding others’ attachments - that of Harriet and Jane Fairfax and her own with Frank Churchill. When Mr. Knightley reprimands her for insulting Miss Bates, Emma realizes that she is not a pampered exception but a part of a larger community.

Just as Elizabeth Bennet is an example of Austen’s ironic characterization, within Wilde’s ironic characterization, Lady Windermere is a prime example of what I call a “rebellious conformist,” a character who initially seems to conform to social mores, then rebels against them. She is morally upright and loyal to her husband, looking down upon the likes of Mrs. Erlynne. Yet when her faith in her husband is tested, she is ready to defy society, abandon her child and run away with Lord Darlington. She returns to her husband, but keeps her former plan secret. As for Mrs. Erlynne, she is seen as evidence of Wilde’s modernity. Powell sees Wilde’s radicalness in the fact that Mrs. Erlynne is never morally punished for the mistakes she made in youth (Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s), while Sammells sees her as a feminist figure because

As a female dandy she effects a reversal of gender power-relations (on the public stage of the ball, her re-entrance into “respectable” society,
she tells Lord Windermere that she can manage the men, though
confesses to being afraid of the women). By refusing the role of
mother and escaping to Europe with a rich husband she achieves a
victory of sorts, for “cleverness” over morality and the sexual double-
standard in particular. (89)

Here Wilde is employing ironic characterization to satirize marriage. Lady
Windermere, the “good” wife is revealed as a hypocritical puritan. Wilde shows her
ideals of a marriage based upon complete honesty as not viable, even in her own
home. And although Mrs. Erlynne is punished at the end of the play and
notwithstanding her status as “fallen” woman and “bad” wife, her witty bon mots give
the audience more pleasure than Lady Windermere’s melodramatic speeches.

Irony in the form of reversal of expectations occurs in the ironic and often
irreverent observations Austen and Wilde’s characters make, which sometimes
surprises the audience with an unexpected reversal at the end of a seemingly clichéd
phrase. In Northanger Abbey for example, Austen humorously parodies eighteenth-
century conduct books when her narrator states that “imbecility in females is a great
enhancement of their personal charms” and that “A woman especially, if she have the
misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can…I will only add
in justice to men [that]… there is a portion of them too reasonable and well informed
themselves to desire anything more in a woman than ignorance.” With regard to
marriage “a good-looking girl with…a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a
clever young man…” (99). In Lady Susan, Lady Susan wishes her daughter to dislike
school, for “…to be mistress of French, Italian, German, music, singing, and drawing,
etc., will gain a woman some applause, but will not add one lover to her list…” (Lady Susan 253). There is more than mere ironic word-play at issue here, for in both statements Austen satirizes the concept that education and/or intelligence in a woman is not an asset on the marriage market.

Austen’s most ironic comments on human nature have the feeling of off-hand comic observation, such as: “Artlessness will never do in love matters…” (Lady Susan 274). This remark looks forward to Wilde’s view of “earnestness” as artificial, especially regarding courtship and marriage. The “universal truth” of Pride and Prejudice’s first line is therefore only “true” for those who, like Mrs. Bennet see everything as pertaining to the marriage market.

Irreverent observation on the subject of education is evident in the following scene in The Importance of Being Earnest, in which a dowager interviews a young man as a possible mate for her daughter:

LADY BRACKNELL. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing.
Which do you know?
JACK. (After some hesitation). I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.
LADY BRACKNELL. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance…Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. (332)

Austen’s narrator speaks of ignorance in women, Wilde’s character refers to men’s education. In both examples instead of the usual concealment of ignorance an embracement of ignorance is recommended. Austen is humorously ironic in her
recommendation, implying that men prefer ignorant women as mates in order to feel superior and that intelligent women have no choice but to act out this part because in the early nineteenth century “The rare women who had shared their brothers' lessons... who found these studies of interest, were advised to keep quiet about it” (Myer 41). In Wilde’s case, a silly woman’s comments are a dig at the aristocracy as well as a critique of education.

Wilde’s ironic and irreverent observations on the subject of marriage usually occur in epigrammatic phrases. Knox calls Wilde “willfully self-contradictory” (Oscar Wilde in the 1990s). For example, one of Wilde’s characters laments that “The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life” (Lady Windermere’s Fan 400) another, referring to wives, wittily asserts that “It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing” (ibid 403).

Many writers in the nineteenth century wrote in a style that incorporated ironic and irreverent observations, but Austen and Wilde are special in that they fill seemingly off-hand observations with deeper meanings and seemingly profound observations with irreverent meaning:

ALGERNON. If ever I get married, I’ll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK. …The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted. (The Importance of Being Earnest 323)

Here Wilde is commenting on what he believes to be the dissipated state of late nineteenth-century marriage through Algernon’s glibness and Jack’s more serious warning. Algernon’s seemingly off-hand comment is an ironic epigram in itself. He
wittily proclaims that he will try to continue all of the pleasures of his bachelor existence once he marries. Through Algernon’s comment, Wilde refers to those who do not take marriage seriously. Through Jack’s comment, Wilde refers to those whose lack of respect for marriage allows them to commit adultery. Jack purposely misunderstands Algernon’s comment, implying that those who “forget” their spouses, by committing adultery or seriously neglecting them, are taken by their aggrieved spouses to divorce court. The Divorce Law for the first time allowed spouses to dissolve marriages. Although controversial, it allowed people to end unhappy marriages, something much more difficult to do in Austen’s time. The off-hand way that Wilde refers to divorce in his comedies shows how far late-Victorian society’s ideas of marriage had come since Austen’s time, for although she refers to dissolved marriages in her juvenilia, Austen makes no mention of such marriages in novels intended for publication.

In addition to ironic and often irreverent observations, both authors also employ ironic situations and dramatic irony when satirizing marriage, allowing the audience to know more than the characters. Austen is a master at allowing her audience to see what her characters cannot, employing free indirect discourse to describe people and events from a seemingly third-person omniscient perspective, but in the way that a particular character sees and understands them. This type of narrator allows the reader to sense the righteousness of the heroine’s emotions while being made to understand when she is wrong. Austen’s novels are dramatic in this sense, with the reader sympathizing for or against certain characters, especially in matters of love.
Barreca deems *Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* "ironic comedies" (*Last Laughs* 7). I believe this can be seen in *Emma* where we know, despite Emma’s ignorance, that she and Mr. Knightley are meant for each other, as are Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Catherine and Henry in *Northanger Abbey*. We can also quickly see that Marianne and Willoughby are not meant for each other in *Sense and Sensibility*, despite Marianne’s love for the young man. In *Mansfield Park* we understand that of all the household, Fanny is the most worthy of love and happiness, despite her initially lowly position and her own self-doubt. Such self-doubt also plagues Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* even though the reader knows that Edward favors her over Lucy Steele.

Wilde also employs dramatic irony when addressing the subject of marriage in his plays. In *A Woman of No Importance*, the audience is allowed to know Gerald’s parentage before the young man is informed of it, allowing for greater sympathy towards Mrs. Arbuthnot. Similarly, in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* the audience is privy to Mrs. Erlynne’s past, while Lady Windermere remains in the dark. She never knows that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother, giving a greater poignancy to the older woman’s speech urging Lady Windermere to, at all costs, “remain with her child” for Mrs. Erlynne regrets giving up her daughter and urges her now not to give up the right to her own child by becoming a “fallen woman” like herself.

As for ironic situation, Wilde’s works are full of them, especially dramatic, often melodramatic, irony. *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be called an “ironic comedy.” Here comic ironies abound as Jack’s “brother” Earnest appears in the form of Algernon after Jack has “killed” him. Another irony occurs when the avowed bachelor Algernon becomes engaged. More hilarious ironies abound as Cecily and Gwendolyn seem to be engaged to the same man, Lady
Bracknell accepts Cecily for her nephew after discovering Cecily’s “worth” and Miss Prism is revealed as little Jack’s nanny. In addition, Jack is revealed as Lady Bracknell’s nephew, Gwendolyn’s cousin and Algernon’s brother. The final humorous irony in the play occurs when Jack discovers that he was born with the name “Ernest” after all and both men find out that they “had been telling the truth all along” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 384).

Dramatic irony also plays a role in *An Ideal Husband* when Lady Chiltern, who has heretofore expected impeccable moral conduct from her husband, is forced to hide from him behind a door at Lord Goring’s apartment as well as reveal that she has written a compromising note to Lord Goring. The “villain” of the play, Mrs. Cheveley, who has spent the comedy attempting to ensnare other characters for her own purposes, is metaphorically caught in a bejeweled wrist cuff, from which she cannot escape unless she renounces her evil schemes. The cuff symbolizes both her greed and her punishment.

A similar level of dramatic irony ensues in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, when the morally impeccable Lady Windermere is almost compromised when she leaves her fan at Lord Darlington’s residence. It is known that Lord Darlington has been pining for her. Mrs. Erlynne then compromises herself in order to save her daughter and Lady Windermere is forced to admit her mistaken notions of morality.

Austen’s works also contain many humorous situational ironies. Several appear in *Emma* alone. Mr. Elton’s proposal to Emma not Harriet is one, as is Harriet’s love for Mr. Knightley rather than for Frank Churchill as Emma thought. Frank’s love for Jane rather than herself as the heroine misguidedly thought and Knightley’s love for Emma rather than Jane – Emma is wrong once more. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the situation in which Robert Ferrars marries Lucy Steele after his brother was disinherited because he was engaged to Lucy is a plot twist worthy of the later Wilde. Dramatic irony occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth is unsure whether Darcy will propose again after she had refused him, unaware that Darcy helped Lydia for her sake.
It is also ironic that Darcy becomes interested in Elizabeth only when she refuses to dance with him because she does not act the toady like others in classes below him.

In addition to her main comic device of irony, Austen employs parody. She parodies the prevalent literary styles of her time, mocking the over-blown romantic, gothic and epistolary styles of the eighteenth century. Broad parody can be also be found in her juvenilia, where she mimics not only the form of earlier writing, but the sycophantic tone found in dedications to patrons. She volubly dedicates most of her earlier writing to her sister. In her later novels such as Sense and Sensibility, Austen parodies sentimental and gothic novels, especially in the melodramatic character of Marianne. By contrast, Catherine, the heroine in Northanger Abbey is also a parody of a romantic heroine in her very anti-romanticism. For example, she is not melodramatically devastated when a man she admires fails to attend a ball; she eats normally and sleeps well that night, forgetting all about him. Growing up, Catherine was a tomboy, “noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house” (Northanger Abbey 6). Although she believes herself destined to be a romantic heroine on account of obsessive reading of novels such as The Mysteries of Udolpho, Catherine is in fact an ordinary young woman from a common-place background who began life as plain-looking. In Northanger Abbey Austen spends the second half of the novel parodying gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe’s The Romance of the Forest (1791). This novel’s influence is seen in the scene where Catherine is thrilled to discover, stuffed into the back of a closet, what she believes to be a secret manuscript detailing villainous crimes of her beloved’s father, only to see that it is a collection of...
old laundry bills. In addition, Catherine’s suspicions that General Tilney murdered his wife is a reference to Radcliffe’s *Sicilian Romance* (1790).

Another similarity in the authors’ styles is their use of wit to satirize marriage. I take “wit” to mean “an intelligent, natural ability to perceive and understand as well as express in an ingeniously humorous manner the relationship between seemingly incongruous or disparate things” (*Webster’s Dictionary*). Such expression of incongruities often causes surprise. Austen and Wilde both have acute perception and an eye for the absurd in life. In her novels Austen's wit is of a much quieter variety than Wilde's but her juvenilia, letters and *Lady Susan* show a penetrating wit every bit as lively as that which Wilde later develops. For example, in *Lady Susan* the title character humorously confides to her friend of the “discreet” life she has led since her husband’s death: “…my being only four months a widow…I have admitted no one’s attentions but Manwaring’s” (224). Lady Susan states that she “cannot easily resolve on anything so serious as marriage, especially as I am not at present in want of money…” (257), a comment worthy of Wilde’s later dandies. Lady Susan is wittily described as a woman who “does not confine herself to that honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable” (248).

Both authors employ satire to bring down the status quo, employing wit to highlight social instabilities, and both wrote in eras rife with change. In satirizing marriage, Austen revised the rules of the gender game from within her novels by laughing at men, showing that they are not superior creatures after all. Wilde ridiculed aristocrats for the same purpose. According to Marilyn Butler’s definition, a
common complaint from critics is that Austen ignores events of her time, that her novels seemingly revel in safety and ease, while the threat of revolution occupied England. Butler sees Austen as someone very much concerned with events of her time. I agree with this view because Austen laughs at everything in her juvenilia—“literary conventions, social mores, history, love, death—with a wild abandon” (Bilger). This is what Wilde does in his plays. The instability of the late eighteenth century can be seen in Austen’s early work, which is quite irreverent. In it she proceeds to deal flippantly with sibling rivalry, drunkenness, adultery, seduction, illegitimacy, destitution, suicide, mercenary marriage, murder, prison, the gallows, deformity, speech impediment, galloping consumption, steel mantraps, physical injury. (Myer 8)

Myer explains that "The squirearchy among whom the young Jane Austen moved was less stable than one might think from...her novels. If one reads between her lines, one finds an exploration of social tensions, social and economic change" (4).

Austen employs wit to highlight societal instabilities, especially those that can be seen in marriage. Wilde employs the comic technique of wit for the same purpose. This can be seen in Lady Windermere’s Fan when Lord Darlington sees marriage as “a game,” one “that is going out of fashion” (389). Wilde draws on this type of witty tone in order to satirize marriage in all of his comic works. The tone is purposely exaggerated and flippant, creating often abrupt wit. Wilde also creates wit of a greater subtly: “I assure you I was horribly deceived in Ernest” (A Woman of No
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Importance 445). Here a female wit comments on her husband’s character simply by mentioning his name.

Both Austen and Wilde draw upon witty dialogue when satirizing marriage. Austen’s humorous dialogue has double and triple meanings, with the reader having to decode subtexts of seemingly casual interactions. Austen and Wilde endow their characters with skill in repartee and allow them to express themselves in their own words. Lady Susan says that “If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence” (268). But in Austen, it is sometimes dangerous to be too witty, too skilled in repartee. Although some of Austen’s heroines and their mates are well-spoken, such as Elizabeth and Darcy in Pride and Prejudice, Anne and Wentworth in Persuasion and Emma and Knightley, being well-spoken can also conceal negative traits, as in the case of Wickham in Pride and Prejudice, Mary and Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park and Lady Susan. These characters’ immorality is revealed through their joking dialogue, despite the sparkling wit of their remarks. Wilde’s amoral men-about-town, Algernon in The Importance of Being Earnest, Lord Darlington in Lady Windermere’s Fan, Lord Goring in A Woman of No Importance and Lord Henry Wotton in Dorian Gray, employ wit and repartee to elude familial and social responsibilities such as courtship and marriage.

While it is impossible for a character to be too witty in Wilde’s plays, in Austen, even well-meaning characters run into trouble through an “excess” of wit and what Robert Polhemus calls a dangerous talent for comedy (Comic Faith). This happens to Emma when she hurts the feelings of her neighbor. By causing everyone to laugh at Miss Bates, Emma temporarily loses Mr. Knightley’s respect. It also happens to
Frank Churchill when he unintentionally hurts his fiancé by making witty remarks that put her reputation into question. Elizabeth suffers when, like Emma, her ability to satirize those around her sometimes forces her into judging too quickly. She misjudges both Darcy and Wickham. When Elizabeth tells Darcy: “neither of us perform before strangers, we are very much alike” (*Pride and Prejudice* 122), her reassurance is important. Unlike Wilde’s characters, who “perform” for each other within his plays and “perform before strangers” onstage, Austen’s heroines and heroes attempt the very honesty and “earnestness” Wilde satirizes. Unlike Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine who put on a show for the sake of others, Elizabeth and Darcy are alike in their sincerity.

A contrast between Austen and Wilde is that in her marriage satires, Austen moves from parody to realism. It is unclear as he moves from melodrama to satire, whether Wilde is parodying theatrical Victorian melodrama or drawing upon it for his marriage-related comedies. In his satires, Wilde seeks to create contempt for the object being satirized. Austen is often viewed as a “gentle” writer, yet she frequently arouses contempt for her characters as well. Like Wilde, she is a master of cutting comments. Virginia Woolf said that

One after another she creates her fools, her prigs, her worldlings, her Mr. Collinses, her Sir Walter Ellotts, her Mrs. Bennets. She encircles them with the lash of a whip-like phrase which, as it runs round them, cuts out their silhouettes for ever. But there they remain; no excuse is found for them and no mercy shown them...Sometimes it seems as if
In *Regulated Hatred in Jane Austen* D. W. Harding also sees Austen as someone who aggressively ridicules not only her society but her very readers: “her books are, as she meant them to be, read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked; she is a literary classic of the society which attitudes like hers, held widely enough, would undermine” (6). Like Wilde, Austen laughs at her society as well as her audience; like Wilde she is “concern[ed] with the survival of the sensitive and penetrating individual in a society of conforming mediocrity” (ibid).

Like Austen, Wilde also created contempt for the objects of his marriage satire; Sammells calls it a “delicate relationship of affection and contempt” (89), a phrase that I believe can be applied to Austen in relation to her characters and to the society she mocks. Both writers ridicule hypocritical moralists in their marriage satire. For example, in commenting on “puritans” in a letter to Leonard Smithers, Wilde says that he “never came across anyone in whom the moral sense was dominant who was not heartless, cruel, vindictive, log-stupid, and entirely lacking in the smallest sense of humanity” (*Letters* 996).

In characterization, both writers will sometimes employ caricature for minor characters, always having one or two oblivious characters who are constantly surprised by turns of events obvious to everyone else. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennett, “a woman of high temper and little understanding” (5), is unaware of the complexity of the relationships forming between her daughters and men in the vicinity. Lydia is a smaller version of her mother and is desperate to marry. She and
Kitty are caricatures of soldier-crazed young women, while Mary is a caricature of a pedant whose marriage prospects look equally dim.

Other caricatures include Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, who is blindly convinced of his importance and personal attractions as a marriage prospect. In *Mansfield Park* Rushworth is an empty-minded buffoon whose status as a fiancé is secured only by his wealth, while Lady Bertram is an ineffectual hypochondriac.

Caricatures in *Sense and Sensibility* include the weak-minded John Dashwood who is controlled by his wife, the dandy Robert Ferrars who ends by marrying Lucy Steele and the Palmers, which include a cynical husband and a silly wife. In general, Austen’s antagonists are often money-grubbing caricatures.

Wilde also employs caricature for minor characters. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Lady Agatha lacks personal will. A caricature of a dutiful daughter, this “little chatterbox” answers only with “Yes mamma” and submits to whatever her mother asks, including marriage. Meanwhile, Lord “Tuppy” Augustus is an “old boy,” ridiculous as a dandy, stupid and oblivious as a suitor. He is eventually fooled into marrying Mrs. Erlynne, despite her past and his previously bad luck with wives.

Wilde often shows the obliviousness of his caricatures by placing them in a conversation where the oblivious character completely misunderstands the point of the discussion and confidently comments on a completely different subject. These are usually laughed at by the wits in the room.

Austen’s minor characters are sometimes exaggerations or minimizations of major characters. They also serve as foils or antitheses to the main characters. In *Emma*, both Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates can be seen as minimizations of or foils for Emma.
Without her wealth, Emma’s unmarried lot would be that of Jane and in later years that of Miss Bates.

Wilde also excels in satire through exaggeration. If Austen satirizes manners, Wilde ridicules them, having characters put forth purposely silly statements. In the following exchange a woman interviewing a young man as a possible husband for her daughter:

LADY BRACKNELL. Do you smoke?
JACK. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.
LADY BRACKNELL. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 332)

At times the authors’ penchant for exaggeration veers towards the absurd. I take “absurd” to be defined as something ridiculously incongruous or unreasonable. Austen and Wilde employ absurdity in both characterization and plot development in their marriage satire. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s deep insights into marriage and the social life of the aristocracy show London society at its most absurd. The play abounds with ridiculous complications and misunderstandings regarding courtships and coincidences that lead to pat resolutions of barriers to marriage. Wilde’s Lady Bracknell’s self-importance and absurdity may be compared to Austen’s Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s in *Pride and Prejudice*.

As in all satires of marriage, Austen and Wilde describe friction between in-laws and relatives. Ineffectual parents and spoiled children are also included in the marriage satire. “Demmed nuisance, relations!” says one of Wilde’s dandies, “But
they make one so demmed respectable” (Lady Windermere’s Fan 399). Austen satirizes in-laws with wry humor in novels such as Persuasion. Relatives, such as Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice and Mrs. Dashwood’s brother in Sense and Sensibility, are often usurpers of what is sensed to rightfully belong to the heroine and her family. The patronage of relations, such as the Bertrams in Mansfield Park is also seen as means towards betterment and therefore the peculiarities of the relations themselves and their officious, tyrannizing behavior, must be borne with good humor.

In addition, parents in Austen and Wilde are subjects of comedy. Wilde’s old-fashioned Lord Caversham in An Ideal Husband has little control over his modern, dandy son, Lord Goring. Caversham’s advice, ironically, is for Goring to model his life on Sir Robert Chiltern’s, but Goring knows the problems that lie under the veneer of Chiltern’s successful marriage and career. In the figure of Isabella Woodhouse, Austen shows mothering as unintellectual. Emma’s sister has five children and is stereotypically feminine: silly, soft-hearted and dependent. In Austen, parents are usually negative role models for both small and grown children. For example, in Pride and Prejudice Mrs. Bennett does more harm than good in promoting mercenary matches for her daughters while Mr. Bennett enjoys irritating his wife into hysterics and withdraws from his family and the world at large. He indulges Lydia and is ineffectual when she runs away, having provided her with little discipline. In Emma, Mr. Woodhouse also provides his daughter with little guidance, imagining her perfect in every way and wishing her never to marry.

Characterization in Austen and Wilde is made up of characters who inhabit newly-leisured, tightly-knit communities. Austen portrays the rural gentry who used
to be working yeomen and wrote primarily for the middle class while Wilde satirizes
the London upper-class (formerly the merchant class) and had both upper and middle-
class society as his audience.¹ Austen underscores the small scope of the community
she depicts when she wrote that her writing was like "A little bit (two inches wide) of
ivory on which I work with so fine a brush" (*Letters* 323).

Austen and Wilde’s humor is particularly suited to formal social settings. The
settings both authors employed, such as balls and drawing rooms, are symbolic of the
often claustrophobic social interactions within these communities. Both writers set
most of their "scenes" indoors, drawing on formal social gatherings as settings for
dramatic turns of events. Austen's picnics, tea gatherings and carriage rides and
Wilde's dinner parties are settings where characters are trapped by their environment,
often forced to show their true colors.

Austen and Wilde’s characterization in their marriage satire is as telling for what
it leaves out as for what it consists of. Within their respective tightly knit
communities, both authors concentrate on relationships between adults, leaving any
children in the background. Nineteenth-century marriages usually resulted in
children, with the average often exceeding ten surviving children per family. The fact
that these authors concentrate on marriage without taking children into account sets
them apart from other nineteenth-century writers. In Wilde, for example, Lady

¹Why did audiences laugh so hard at Wilde’s comedies? His plays lampooned the
aristocracy but it is the middle class that flocked to see them. By Wilde’s time,
nineteenth-century aristocracy had lost political power. They were useful as an
object of fun, as a stand-in for the middle class. Those who came to see Wilde’s
plays knew that they were being satirized, but the late-Victorian middle-class
was so self-satisfied that they did not feel threatened by Wilde’s barbed jibes.
They took his satire in stride and simply enjoyed the show.
Windermere’s infant is hardly mentioned. And although Austen had great affection for her small nieces and nephews, and satirizes Aunt Norris’ overly authoritarian training of children in *Mansfield Park*, she believed that children required strict education and that they should not be indulged, as the spoiled and badly behaved Middleton children are in *Sense and Sensibility*. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax compares a life of taking care of children (that of a governess) to slave trade. Describing a toddler in “Lesley Castle,” Austen puts a satiric spin on childhood accomplishments while criticizing the infantilization of women by patriarchal society:

> The dear creature is just turned two years old – as handsome as though two and twenty, as sensible as though two and thirty, and as prudent as though two and forty…[because] she has a very fine complextion and very pretty features, that she already knows the first two letters of the alphabet and that she never tears her frocks. (79)

Both Austen and Wilde seem paradoxical in their respective writing style. For example, although Austen’s novels end with “happy endings” celebrating the marriage of the heroine: a traditionally conventional way to end a funny story, she does not wholly agree with the traditional values these endings suggest. It is easier to see through Wilde’s “happy endings” because they are often rooted in deception. The comic literary elements within the humor of both allow for analogues between the authors.

The authors diverge in comic philosophy, in their view of the individual and marriage’s social role. Austen criticizes certain *aspects* of marriage but does not denigrate marriage itself. She wishes to educate, giving examples of good marriages
and people. When Wilde attacks his time’s social vices and follies, he does so amorally, without attempting to educate. Despite his cynicism, he respects those who courageously retain individuality in a conformist society. Wilde thinks one should attempt self-development and self-understanding despite social strictures. Austen believes self-understanding is important only in allowing one to better judge others and be a good member of society. Her positively portrayed characters, after some comic trial and error, surrender some individual views to become integrated parts of society through marriage. Wilde’s wittiest characters, (none are “positive” or “negative”), fail to conform to social strictures, even after marriage.
The Victorian

Bibliography


