The Pride of “Prejudice”?
— Jane Austen’s Revision of Edmund Burke*

Heejeong Cho

A number of Jane Austen studies that have appeared in the last three decades have attempted to locate Austen in a feminist context. These attempts, in general, tackle what Ian Watt called “the first and most enduring critical problem of Jane Austen studies: the patent restriction of her subject-matter”(2), by demonstrating the historical significance of Austen’s subject-matter in the feminist context of her contemporary society. As Margaret Kirkham summarizes, feminist critics prove that “Austen’s subject-matter” is indeed “the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism”(xi). Furthermore, another type of feminist contextualization achieved by Deborah Kaplan shows that Austen’s foregrounding of this subject-matter was enabled by the “female affiliations,” which empowered Austen’s literary career (2-6). By offering a largely positive evaluation of the “feminine” experience, Kirkham and Kaplan direct attention to Austen’s successful exploitation of her subject-matter and thus demonstrate the historical dimension of

* This research was supported by the Chung-Ang University Research Grants in 2005.
Austen’s novels.

The “feminist” contexts in which they situate Jane Austen could also be connected to Austen’s awareness of social concerns on a more general level. As Claudia Johnson asserts, “the eighteenth-century novel never confined itself within the tidy sexual boundaries we have since drawn” (1988, xx). Especially, in the extremely politically-charged atmosphere of the late eighteenth century, incidents taking place “at home” usually have significance reaching far beyond the domestic sphere. This is why critics such as F. R. Leavis believes that Austen has a deep moral concern influencing the whole tradition of British novel. In a similar vein, Alastair Duckworth’s emphasis on “Jane Austen’s serious concern over the state and the continuity of the social structure” (31) also deserves careful attention, since his point generates an image of Austen as an author engaging in the ideological debates in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

More recently, Marilyn Butler’s Jane Austen and the War of Ideas clearly relates Austen’s novels to the political climate in the 1790s and aims at clarifying the central conflicts in the fictional world of Jane Austen. According to Butler, the main conflicts in Austen’s novels are those between sentimentalism and conservatism, which, without exception, lead to the triumph of conservatism. Yet, while admitting my indebtedness to Butler’s succinct explanation, I depart from her thesis in two related ways: first, following Johnson, I refuse to view sentimentalism as an exclusive property of the Jacobin writers in Austen’s time. As Edmund Burke’s sentimental portrayal of the French Queen eloquently illustrates, passion and emotional appeal function as a persuasive weapon of the anti-Jacobin writers, as well as the Jacobins. As Johnson puts it, “the rhetoric of ‘sensibility’ is fully as volatile as that of ‘true liberty’” and Austen is aware that “the codes employed by the two opposing camps are not always so discrete and mutually exclusive” (1988, xxii). Secondly, and accordingly, Austen’s novels cannot be easily reduced to the world of binary oppositions, where the characters are