



CELEBRATING
PRIDE
AND
PREJUDICE

•
200 Years of
JANE AUSTEN'S
Masterpiece

•
Susannah Fullerton

For my daughter— my dearest, loveliest Elinor Elizabeth

First published in 2013 by Voyageur Press, an imprint of MBI Publishing Company,
400 First Avenue North, Suite 300, Minneapolis, MN 55401 USA

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Text © 2012 Susannah Fullerton

Illustrations © as on page 240

First published in the United Kingdom in 2012 by Frances Lincoln Limited
under the title *Happily Ever After: Celebrating Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice*

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ISBN-13: 978-0-7603-4436-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fullerton, Susannah, 1960-

[Happily ever after]

Celebrating *Pride and prejudice* : 200 years of Jane Austen's masterpiece / Susannah Fullerton.

p. cm.

"First published in the United Kingdom in 2012 by Frances Lincoln Limited under the title *Happily ever after: celebrating Jane Austen's Pride and prejudice*"--T.p. verso.

Summary: "As *Pride and Prejudice* turns 200, discover all the details of its creation, groundbreaking style, and tremendous, important legacy in this loving commemoration of Jane Austen's brilliant work"-- Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7603-4436-1 (hardback)

1. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817. *Pride and prejudice*. 2. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817--Appreciation. 3. Austen, Jane, 1775-1817--Influence. I. Title. PR4034.P73H37 2013

823'.7--dc23

2012029595

Cover design: Connie Gabbert

Cover illustration: artplay/Shutterstock.com

Front flap: *Lady Catherine and her nephews* (illustration by Hugh Thomson)

Back flap: *Elizabeth reads Mr Darcy's letter* (illustration by Hugh Thomson)

Back cover: *Portrait of Jane Austen*, courtesy of the Library of Congress



Letters are a notable feature of Jane Austen's style in *Pride and Prejudice*. Here Elizabeth reads a letter from her aunt, Mrs Gardiner (illustration by Philip Gough).

'Bright and Sparkling'

THE STYLE OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

yet I think it is well expressed'

When Jane Austen began to write her novels, she did something extremely innovative in the world of English literature. She incorporated into her narration a new technique, which has become known as 'Free Indirect Discourse' (FID), and this soon became a hallmark of her writing style. She was not the very first author to use it – Goethe did so in Germany, where it was known as '*erlebte Rede*' – but she was the first English novelist to use FID consistently and extensively. Other writers followed – Flaubert, Kafka, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were each, in their time, praised for the modernity of their styles using this narrative technique – but it was Jane Austen who led the way and showed them all how it was done.

FID (also known as 'free indirect speech') can only be used in a novel written with third-person narration. The device involves the blending of that third-person narration with first-person narrative speech. However, this is done without any speech marks, and there are no 'he said' and 'she said' prefacing or following the words. So while we do not actually get direct words spoken by a character, we still get the way that character thinks or speaks. FID enables us to share a character's viewpoint, join him or her emotionally and share joys and fears, prejudices and amusement. It permits us to learn things that perhaps that character would never dare to speak aloud. FID focuses on interiority of character, and provides a more intimate view. It examines inner consciousness in a way not always permitted by more standard forms of narration. It seriously alters the way in which a story is

told, and is a sophisticated device that demands skill in the handling. Jane Austen loved FID because it allowed her great scope for irony: she could mingle omniscient narration with the thoughts of a character, thus highlighting any ironic contrast between the two.

Much of the FID in *Pride and Prejudice* is connected with Elizabeth Bennet. After Darcy has first proposed to her, we get an example of the technique in action:

Her astonishment, as she reflected on what had passed, was increased by every review of it. That she should receive an offer of marriage from Mr Darcy! that he should have been in love with her for so many months! so much in love as to wish to marry her in spite of all the objections which had made him prevent his friend's marrying her sister, and which must appear at least with equal force in his own case, was almost incredible!

The first sentence is standard third-person narration. The narrator tells us that Elizabeth is astonished and thinks over what has just happened. But with the next sentence, we move inside her mind. There are no speech marks – she is not talking to herself or to anyone else – but the perspective is Elizabeth's, filtered through the third-person narration. It is not the narrator who is shocked by the proposal – everything written so far by the narrator has led up to this climax – but it is Elizabeth who is stunned by surprise. The thoughts of his being 'so much in love' are 'almost incredible' to her, but not to the narrator who created them. FID here takes us seamlessly into Lizzy's mind, before seamlessly moving back out again to allow usual narrative to continue.

Mr Collins is very often the target of ironic FID within the novel as, for example, when he speaks of Lady Catherine:

Mr Collins was eloquent in her praise. The subject elevated him to more than usual solemnity of manner, and with a most important aspect he protested that he had never in his life witnessed such behaviour in a person of rank – such affability and condescension as he had himself experienced

from Lady Catherine. She had been graciously pleased to approve of both the discourses, which he had already had the honour of preaching before her. She had also asked him twice to dine at Rosings, and had sent for him only the Saturday before to make up her pool of quadrille in the evening. Lady Catherine was reckoned proud by many people he knew, but he had never seen anything but affability in her. She had always spoken to him as she would to any other gentlemen; she made not the smallest objection to his joining in the society of the neighbourhood, nor to his leaving his parish occasionally for a week or two to visit his relations. She had even condescended to advise him to marry as soon as he could, provided he choose with discretion.

Clearly here it is not the narrator who thinks Lady Catherine has 'such affability and condescension', or that her notice and advice is such an honour. This is Mr Collins's view only. Lady Catherine's exact degree of graciousness and condescension is therefore immediately made the subject of doubt to the reader, even if it is unquestioned by Mr Collins.

Jane Austen is especially adept at handling FID for group voices in *Pride and Prejudice*. In these cases, she does not move into the mind of just one speaker, but rather into the mind of the neighbourhood in general, or into the spiteful thoughts of old women in Meryton. When Mr Darcy, at the assembly ball, is pronounced 'above being pleased' and 'the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world', one can hear the hurt and petulant tones of snubbed gentry in a provincial town. This enables Jane Austen to provide a convincing backdrop of the Meryton milieu, without having to particularize individual characters.



Jane Austen action figure, ready with quill pen to start writing.

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice* the narration glides effortlessly between standard narrative form and the free indirect discourse of Elizabeth, Lydia, Mr Collins, the inhabitants of Meryton and several other characters in the novel. Most readers are unaware that such a technique exists or that Jane Austen is using it so extensively and cleverly, but it is a vital aspect of her style and it contributes greatly to the variety and comedy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

THE DIALOGUE OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Lord David Cecil, who wrote a delightful biography of Jane Austen, commented that 'People who do not like Jane Austen are the kind of people who do not like sunshine.' Reading *Pride and Prejudice* does indeed feel like a burst of sunshine from a cloudy sky. What is it about the way in which it is written that communicates such sparkle, such *joie de vivre*, to its readers?

Much of this charm comes from the dialogue. Crisp, exact and witty, every speech in the novel reveals the character of the speaker and amuses the reader. No wonder film-makers are so attracted to the novel: the dialogue is a positive gift to any scriptwriter. The first chapter of the book is an excellent example. Dialogue starts after only two sentences, with 'My dear Mr Bennet . . .', and within three pages of conversation the personalities of Mr Bennet and 'his lady' are vividly before us in all their glorious absurdity. Mrs Bennet is loquacious, Mr Bennet is terse; she is silly, he is dry: 'You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.' 'You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.' This dialogue in Chapter One provides a portrait of the Bennet marriage, information about their five daughters needing husbands, and brilliantly efficient character portrayal, along with the fun and comedy of the scene.

Jane Austen commented, after *Pride and Prejudice* had been published, that she ought perhaps to have added some more 'he said's' and 'she said's' to make her dialogues clearer for the reader. She was wrong! Every voice is so distinguishable from another that it is easy to know who is speaking. Who but Mr Collins would

be gushing about 'her ladyship's concurrence'; who but Mary would prose on about 'the generality of female minds'; and when nerves are mentioned of course the speaker is Mrs Bennet.

Jane Austen employs exaggeration within dialogue with great skill. Foolish characters, with little sense of proportion, exaggerate, magnify and overuse language when they speak. Lydia and her 'raptures', Mrs Bennet threatening 'never to see [Elizabeth] again' if she refuses Mr Collins, Lady Catherine and her emphatic pronouncements are all good examples. Elizabeth, and the reader, should beware of Wickham when he describes Mr Darcy Senior as 'the truest friend I ever had' and speaks of being 'grieved to the soul by a thousand tender recollections', but she is seduced by his handsome face and fails to be warned by his over-the-top speeches. Elizabeth, and the reader, must constantly distinguish between gradations, nuances and extremes.

Repetition is also brilliantly used, as Jane Austen re-uses phrases that immediately bring a particular speaker to mind. She had no need to put 'Mr Collins said' in front of any speech that refers to a 'humble abode', or add 'said Sir William' after the court of St James is mentioned. Such 'speech tags' are another part of her stylistic repertoire.

Jane Austen wrote to her sister of the 'playfulness' of her novel's style. One can see her having such fun when her characters speak. They respond so wittily, or cap each other's phrases. When Darcy remarks that poetry is the '*food of love*', Elizabeth replies that if there 'be only a slight, thin sort of inclination', then 'one good sonnet will starve it entirely away'. Darcy has to smile, as she turns a well-known adage on its head. Elizabeth's ripostes to Lady Catherine, when that dowager visits Longbourn and tries to intimidate with her rank, frustrate that domineering woman exceedingly. Lady Catherine might be rich and important, but she is thoroughly beaten in that verbal duel.

The dialogue of *Pride and Prejudice* is honed to perfection, it glitters like a jewel, and from the first speech (Mrs Bennet's) to the very last (Elizabeth's), it is totally convincing, realistic, clever and economical – a dose of sunshine indeed.

THE IRONY OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*
Jane Austen's famous irony is an essential stylistic characteristic of *Pride and Prejudice*. This literary device is much used, and always with extreme skill. With irony she creates discordance between what appears to be and what actually is, and prompts her reader to question or re-evaluate a character or situation.

There is irony of 'theme'. 'Pride' and 'prejudice' are very mixed qualities, each containing good and bad aspects. In this novel 'pride' leads to 'prejudice' and 'prejudice' invites 'pride', and both become intermingled in good and bad degrees. Jane Austen handles these qualities ironically, inviting us to see their incongruities.

She uses irony of situation. The very man who thinks a young woman 'not handsome enough' to tempt him on to the dance floor will, by the end of the novel, be leading her to the altar. The militia who, by removing from Meryton, should be removing all Lydia's flirting partners will end up removing Lydia as well. Lady Catherine arrives at Longbourn to put a stop to a marriage, but ends up by promoting it instead. Elizabeth Bennet insists to Mr Collins that she is not the sort of young lady who risks her 'happiness on the chance of being asked a second time', only to be longing for a second proposal later in the story. She also finds herself at Pemberley face to face with its 'rejected' owner and is only too aware of that situational irony as she blushes with embarrassment. Many of these ironies are

missed by a first-time reader, and that is one of the many reasons why *Pride and Prejudice* is always reread with increased enjoyment.

Then there is irony of character, where Jane Austen uses ironic humour to puncture pomposity, expose ill-breeding, dent self-deception and reveal stupidity. Bingley's sisters dislike the vulgarity of some of the Bennet women, but irony displays how essentially vulgar they are themselves. Irony exposes the ludicrousness of Mrs Bennet's claim that she would be ashamed to accept an entailed property if one ever came her way, when she has never been able to understand entails; it shows up Lady Catherine's vulgarity in stating that Elizabeth would be in no one's way in the servants' quarters'; it highlights the importance of money to all the characters (Mr Darcy soon draws attention in the ballroom by his height and looks, but particularly by 'the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year'); it laughs at gossips ('there was much to be talked of in marrying [Lydia]; and the good-natured wishes for her well-doing, which had proceeded before, from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such a husband, her misery was considered certain'); and it emphasizes a woeful lack of self-knowledge in so many of the characters.

It can occasionally be malicious, as when Elizabeth says of Miss De Bourgh, 'I like her appearance': she doesn't really like the sickly looks of the girl at all, but she thinks such a pathetic woman will serve Mr Darcy right as a wife. Very occasionally irony is self-inflicted. Mr Bennet is clever enough to know his own faults: 'Let me once in my life', he tells his daughter Elizabeth, 'feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough.' Irony can be truly comic: Charlotte Lucas does not do justice to 'the fire and independence of his character' when Mr Collins comes to 'throw himself at her feet', the 'fire' being from a man who is proposing to two women within a few days. There is quiet, precise irony all through the novel. Irony is directed against every character, even at times against the heroine ('Yet the misery, for which years of happiness were to offer no compensation, received soon afterwards material relief, from observing how much the beauty of her sister



They solaced their wretchedness by duets after supper.

Bingley sisters singing duets to solace their wretchedness (illustration by C.E. Clark).

an 'not handsome enough' to tempt him on to the dance floor will, by the end of the novel, be leading her to the altar. The militia who, by removing from Meryton, should be removing all Lydia's flirting partners will end up removing Lydia as well. Lady Catherine arrives at Longbourn to put a stop to a marriage, but ends up by promoting it instead. Elizabeth Bennet insists to Mr Collins that she is not the sort of young lady who risks her 'happiness on the chance of being asked a second time', only to be longing for a second proposal later in the story. She also finds herself at Pemberley face to face with its 'rejected' owner and is only too aware of that situational irony as she blushes with embarrassment. Many of these ironies are

re-kindled the admiration of her former lover'). Irony is a tool that Jane Austen knew how to use for maximum effect. No one is safe from her ironic voice and no reader of *Pride and Prejudice* would want it to be otherwise.

LETTERS IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

'Come as soon as you can on receipt of this . . .', 'I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you . . .', 'Let me hear from you very soon', 'Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter . . .', 'My motive for cautioning you, is as follows . . .', 'Dear Sir, I must trouble you once more for congratulations', 'I would have thanked you before . . .', 'I do not think we shall have quite enough money to live upon' – letters of invitation, letters of thanks, begging letters and those full of explanation, letters announcing dramatic events and letters of congratulation fill many pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel is packed with correspondence, with forty-four letters referred to, and eighteen of those either heavily quoted from or given in full.

Jane Austen inherited the epistolary mode of novel writing from the eighteenth-century writers. Her favourite novelist, Samuel Richardson, wrote *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* as a novel of letters. Almost certainly, *Elinor and Marianne* was written as an epistolary novel before it metamorphosed into *Sense and Sensibility* (which actually contains far fewer letters in its pages than does *Pride and Prejudice*). The scholarly debate continues as to whether or not *First Impressions* was also epistolary, but whatever its original structure, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel in which letters play a vital role. Jane Austen took the epistolary mode and adapted it to her own more believable style of narration, weaving letters very naturally into her text, without straining reader credulity in the way that an unadulterated series of letters is apt to do.

Letter-writing was a serious business in Jane Austen's day. The world of a modern reader is filled with phones, email, texting, blogging and Facebook but what we now do so quickly with the push of a button had to be done laboriously then with paper, quill, ink bottle and considerations of cost. When Mr Collins sends a letter to Mr Bennet, it is Mr Bennet who must pay for postage, and the

longer the Collins effusion, the higher the cost to Mr Bennet. Considerate correspondents wrote very small or 'crossed' their letters (writing on the page, and then rotating that page forty-five degrees and writing over what had already been written, thus saving an extra sheet of paper and more expense). Often letter-writers tried to send letters via friends who were travelling to save the recipient having to pay, or found a Member of Parliament who could 'frank' the letter (as Sir Thomas Bertram does for Fanny's letters in *Mansfield Park*), as MPs could post their letters for free. In the world of *Pride and Prejudice* letters are delivered in many ways, via servants or friends, handed over personally and sent through the post (which was remarkably efficient – Jane's letter to Elizabeth takes four days to reach her, but that is after it has been 'missent elsewhere . . . as Jane had written the direction remarkably ill'. Normally a letter would reach its recipient within two days, carried by horse and carriage up to the north of the country). Letters in the novel convey a great deal of information and often indicate a turn of events – a newcomer arriving on the scene (Mr Collins), an illness (Jane), news of an elopement (Lydia) or an announcement of a marriage (Mr Bennet about his daughters).

Letters in *Pride and Prejudice* also reveal character. Mr Bennet is a lazy correspondent, even when his letters concern business, and this says much for his failure as a husband and father ('About a month ago I received this letter, and about a fortnight ago I answered it, for I thought it a case of some delicacy, and *requiring early attention*' – my italics). Mr Gardiner

Darcy hands Elizabeth his letter (illustration by Joan Hassall).



shoulders Mr Bennet's responsibility of keeping the Bennet women informed after Lydia's elopement, just as he takes on the task of finding Lydia, and his correspondence is punctual, sensible and to the point, like the man himself. Lydia's letters are full of trivia and show a total lack of shame – elopement, dance partners, shopping, clothes and a shotgun wedding are all jumbled together, as if each was of equal importance. When, all unconsciously, Lydia asks in a letter for 'a great slit' in her muslin gown to be repaired, it is such a meaningful line: the image symbolizes the loss of her virginity and the irreparable damage to her reputation, while also illustrating her thoughtlessness. Jane Bennet writes sweet, considerate letters and Mrs Gardiner kind, sensible ones, like her husband. Mr Darcy's long letter, placed mid-way through the novel, is a great set piece of *Pride and Prejudice*, resembling an important soliloquy on the stage. Johnsonian in its long sentences, formal in its injured feelings, yet so desperately trying to be fair, so rational and informative, it also has one of the great endings of any letter: 'I will only add, God bless you.' Such an adieu 'is charity itself', as Elizabeth later tells him.

Mr Darcy writes a superb letter, but it is Mr Collins who must surely be the most prized of all correspondents in *Pride and Prejudice*. His letters are so wonderfully comic that Mr Bennet, much as he hates the occupation, 'would not give up Mr Collins's correspondence for any consideration'. They are pompous, servile, tasteless, verbose, flowery (for example, he announces his wife's pregnancy as 'a young olive-branch'; an olive-branch appears in his very first letter as well, so he is clearly very pleased with that image), foolish, moralizing, mean of spirit and lengthy – quite simply, they are a joy to read. So memorable are they that dictionaries now include an entry for 'a Mr Collins Letter', meaning a letter of thanks for hospitality or entertainment sent by a departed guest – so named because of just such a letter sent by Mr Collins after his first stay at Longbourn.

Letters are a notable feature of Jane Austen's style in *Pride and Prejudice*. They move the plot along, reveal character, indicate arrivals and departures, make dramatic announcements, and hinder or promote courtship. Jane Austen once complimented her sister Cassandra on her epistolary style: 'The letter which I have

this moment received from you has diverted me beyond moderation . . . You are indeed the finest comic writer of the age.' Cassandra's letters to Jane have not survived and we have thus no way of judging Cassandra's abilities in that respect, but surely it was Jane herself who wrote the finest comic letters of her age, when she created letters for her novel. They have successfully diverted two centuries of readers.

OTHER STYLISTIC FEATURES OF *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Unlike Charles Dickens, Jane Austen is not a descriptive writer. She does not provide long passages describing houses, appearance, furniture, clothing or food. 'Things' do not play a large part in her fiction. *Pride and Prejudice* contains few concrete nouns (carriages, gowns, dishes on the table, etc.), but it has plenty of abstract ones (pride, prejudice, hope, sense, astonishment, respect, happiness, consideration, comprehension, reputation, regret – the list goes on). However, when description really matters, and can tell the reader something more than simply about appearances, it is there. We do not need to know whether Longbourn is built of brick or stone, is two-storeyed or three, because such detail would tell us nothing of Elizabeth herself. But with Pemberley, it is a different case altogether. Mr Darcy needs to be revealed – to Elizabeth and to the reader – without prejudice. He needs to be placed in his proper context, not standing diffidently in a Meryton ballroom, nor awkwardly next to Miss Bingley, but in his natural element, 'at home' as master, brother, landlord and employer. What better way of achieving this than by describing Pemberley as a well-run estate, a place where servants are happy, a loving home for Georgiana and a place where 'natural beauty' is to the fore, where taste is evident and where everything is well regulated. And so Jane Austen describes the setting of 'rising ground' for this man rapidly rising in Elizabeth's esteem, rooms that are 'lofty and handsome' (just like their owner), furniture 'neither gaudy nor uselessly fine' (reflecting Darcy's taste) and a picture gallery with its generations of Darcys (showing so clearly why he has a reason to be proud). Economical as ever in her style, Jane Austen describes Pemberley and Mr Darcy at the same time.

Oh,' said Lydia, stoutly, 'I am not afraid; for though I *am* the youngest, I'm the tallest.'

Contrast is an important part of Jane Austen's style – even contrast of height is used to reveal character (illustration by Hugh Thomson).



Contrast is another important feature of *Pride and Prejudice*. There is the contrasting of letters and of speech (both discussed earlier in this chapter), and there is contrast of character. The reader is continually forced to compare Darcy with his friend Bingley, and both those gentlemen with Mr Wickham. We must contrast each Bennet sister with her siblings. Elizabeth refuses Mr Collins, but Charlotte Lucas accepts him, and this tells us much about the differences between the two women. Mr Bennet in his role as father must be compared with Sir William Lucas in the same role, and sensible Aunt Gardiner is a contrast to vulgar Aunt Philips.

There is contrast of action too. Elizabeth receives two unwelcome proposals and both her suitors essentially tell her the same thing: that a girl with as small a dowry as hers and with such a family should be grateful to be asked, and should immediately say 'Yes'. Yet each unsuccessful proposal is handled very differently. Jane Austen cleverly allows Mr Collins to speak for himself: 'To fortune I am perfectly indifferent and shall make no demand . . .', and he assures her, 'in the most animated language of the violence of [his] affection'. As he speaks, Mr Collins reveals himself to be a fool with every word. 'Violence of affection' from a man who has changed that 'affection' from Jane to Elizabeth while Mrs Bennet was 'stirring the fire'! But the last thing Jane Austen wants

is for readers to think the hero of her novel is also a fool or so arrogant that we want no more of him. Mr Darcy opens his proposal by speaking of his 'ardent' feelings, but after that Jane Austen does not permit her hero to speak directly. His proposal is given as reported speech. 'He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride.' Jane Austen lets Mr Collins make a pompous ass of himself, but she won't allow her hero to upset or alienate the reader with his direct utterances. Later, though, when Darcy has learned how to propose properly, she gives him direct speech: 'But your *family* owe me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe, I thought only of you . . . My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever.' By using different narrative techniques, permitting or blocking dialogue, Jane Austen ensures that two men who confidently propose in completely the wrong way are properly differentiated as buffoon and hero in the minds of her readers.

Pride and Prejudice is a beautifully shaped novel. The first half leads up to the climax in the centre of the book: Darcy's first proposal and his letter of explanation. After that important moment, his pride and Elizabeth's prejudice both start to disappear. The novel then develops her growing 'pride' in him and his generosity of spirit, and his 'prejudice' against his aunt and all she stands for. It's like a piece of music rising in a crescendo to a climax, and then diminishing, working through all its themes and motifs until it reaches a happy, peaceful conclusion. It has beautiful symmetry: pride and humility are both there, as are reason and passion, energy and decorum. It is not only Elizabeth and Darcy who are 'united' in the very last sentence but so many intangibles as well.

Pride and Prejudice is a novel of manners, told politely – there is nothing ill bred or boisterous in its style. Civilization is both discussed in its pages and reflected in every one of those pages. This is a novel that involves the reader, inviting evaluation, intellectual discernment and intelligent response. Its shape, clarity, sparkle, harmonies and contrasts together form a whole which achieves what David Cecil so aptly described as 'Mozartian perfection'.