



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



JANE AUSTEN AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Jane Austen began writing *Pride and Prejudice* in 1796; the working title was, fittingly, “First Impressions.” The following year, her father George sent the manuscript to a publisher, but it was rejected immediately. Austen would sit on the first draft of her most famous novel for almost fifteen years before she revised it, gave it a new title, and finally sold it in 1813.

During this time, England was changing rapidly through industrialization, colonial expansion, and the Enlightenment. But one particular event on the European continent had a significant impact on English society in the last decade of the eighteenth century: the French Revolution of 1789.

Can we see the ripple-effects of French class upheaval in *Pride and Prejudice*?

The presence of soldiers in the English countryside—which introduces the Bennets to George Wickham—is perhaps the only palpable reference to the Revolution’s aftereffects in the novel. Republican France declared war against England in 1793, which lasted until 1802 (and started again soon as Napoleon Bonaparte seized power). Besides this, the French Revolution has no bearing on the characters in the novel. However, the themes of class, economics, and social mobility in *Pride and Prejudice* invite us to compare

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THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Austen's peaceful and orderly depiction of English society to the political situation in France, where long-held class distinctions were abruptly negated.

English thinkers were divided on the idea of radical social change. The influential writer Edmund Burke famously condemned the French Revolution, promoting conservative politics based in tradition and stability. Others were inspired by the demand for universal rights (for men, at least) and called for similar reforms in England.

We don't know how Austen felt about these events, as she wrote nothing on the subject. But we can imagine how Mrs. Bennett's worry over getting her daughters wed to rich gentlemen reflects national anxiety over social stability during this time. In a sense, the happy marriage between characters of different classes is an exceedingly optimistic antidote to revolutionary strife. Along the way, however, Elizabeth is able to hold her own against the landed gentry (Mr. Darcy) and the nobility (Lady Catherine de Bourgh) despite her middle-class background. Perhaps in Austen's world, the English middle class finds a more harmonious kind of equality with the social elite based in love.