

Truths universally acknowledged: satire in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and James Gillray's *Harmony before Matrimony*

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This article investigates Jane Austen's status as a satirist by comparing and contrasting her best-known novel with a caricature print by her contemporary James Gillray. The article examines how satire is used in both works to present perspectives on early nineteenth-century attitudes to marriage. Setting the novel and the caricature print in their social and historical contexts, the article highlights their differences in form and purpose but finds, in this pair of examples, many parallels in the technical means by which the satire is conveyed and in the similar intentions of their creators.

With the exception of her generic satire *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen is popularly thought of as ironic rather than satirical. Nobody, meanwhile, would dispute that James Gillray was a satirist. Yet similar techniques were employed by both Austen and Gillray and for similar ends: wit, caricature, and acute social observation for the purposes of exposing human folly or vice and skewering affectation. There are of course key differences arising from the formal distinctions between the satirical print and the novel, and also from Gillray's use of satire which was invariably prominent, as against Austen's which varied in intensity. However, that Austen's satire is often underestimated is due more to perception than actuality. Women have always been less readily associated with satire than men and in Austen's case the influential 'dear Aunt Jane' narrative promulgated by her nephew from 1869 and the more recent commercial industries built upon saccharine or sexualised interpretations of her novels have contributed to a diversion of attention from her sharp wit to her romanticism.¹ By drawing comparisons with and contrasts from Gillray's satirical techniques in *Harmony before Matrimony* (1805), this article will sketch out how Austen deployed this weapon in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to comment on contemporary attitudes to marriage.

Satire is perhaps easier to demarcate than define, 'cuckoo-nesting' as it does in different genres and manifesting itself through a variety of devices from irony to caricature.² All satirists aim to expose folly or vice by using wit, rather than propaganda, to persuade us of the truth of their perceptions. Writers and critics have used satire for many centuries but the Enlightenment period was a golden one, fuelled by the rise of oppositional party politics and by the genius of some of the most gifted satirists of any era, notably Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and William Hogarth. This period also witnessed the development to prominence of two new cultural forms: the caricature print, to which satire was fundamental, and the

¹ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (London: Richard Bentley, 1870).

² Ruben Quintero, 'Introduction' in *A Companion to Satire*, ed. by Ruben Quintero (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), pp. 1-13 (p. 9).

novel, to which it could add a distinctive edge. Hogarth had developed the caricature print into an influential tool for social criticism, but it did not acquire its overtly political dimension until the latter part of the eighteenth century under his successors James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson. Gillray in particular became associated with the lampooning of recognisable political and royal figures, but he was also adept at pillorying fashionable society more generally. *Harmony before Matrimony* (Fig.1) is a fine example of this category.



Figure 1: James Gillray, *Harmony before Matrimony* (1805), hand-coloured etching, 25.6 × 36cm (British Museum, London; © Trustees of the British Museum)

The novel meanwhile remained for much of the eighteenth century an unstable and experimental form which encompassed genres as diverse as travel literature, romance, and philosophical narrative. By the late 1700's two types had grown enormously popular: the gothic novel and the historical romance. In her own novels – in all of which the theme of marriage is prominent – Jane Austen satirises the sentimentality and sensationalism of much of her contemporary fiction and also the snobbery and materialism of her contemporary society. *Pride and Prejudice* is particularly illustrative of the latter. This article will presume

the reader's reasonable familiarity with the characters and events of this well-known novel and will therefore proceed to an examination of the less famous *Harmony before Matrimony* before considering similarities and differences between the two.

Harmony before Matrimony depicts an exaggeratedly fashionable and cultured young couple singing together in an elegant room. The woman plays the harp, looking over her shoulder at the music book which the man holds open for her. The image features several representations of love. The music book is open at 'Duets de l'Amour'; pink roses flourish from two vases on the console table; myrtle – sacred to the goddess Aphrodite – grows in the vase half-hidden by the red curtain; a pair of decorative garlands on the wall incorporate the quiver and arrow of Eros and the bridal torches of Hymen, Greek god of marriage.³ The title of the print, too, apparently instructs the viewer on how to interpret the scene, by exploiting the figurative connotation of the word 'harmony'.

However, other elements undercut this narrative. Most obviously (after the cats, of which more below), the picture over the couple's heads shows Eros firing a blunderbuss at a pair of cooing doves. The table leg just visible by the red curtain is shaped as a grinning, cloven-hoofed satyr. Satyrs, male followers of the Greek god of wine and ecstasy Dionysus, were part-man part-goat creatures who chased the god's female followers while in a perpetual state of intoxication and physical arousal.⁴ On the floor beneath the console table, a heart-shaped vase bears the figure of a Greek sphinx, with a female head and breasts (Egyptian sphinxes were traditionally male).⁵ The sphinx was a treacherous creature in ancient Greece; the word means 'strangler' in Greek and one of the best-known examples appears in Sophocles' drama *Oedipus Rex*, in which the famed Theban sphinx kills and devours all those who cannot solve the apparently impossible riddle she sets.⁶ The sphinx is also associated with lust.⁷

The transmission of meaning in this print relies both on the interrelationship between the elements within it and on their association, in the mind of the viewer, with objects or narratives in the world outside. The satire lies primarily in the ironic mismatch between the title and central element of the 'harmonious' couple, and the various symbols of disharmony. Taken together, these symbols create a sustained and ominous narrative that the couple's romance is doomed to be blasted away by the realities of marriage – implicitly

³ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. by W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1918), 6.24.7.

⁴ Mark P. O. Morford, Robert J Lenardon and Michael Sham, *Classical Mythology, International Tenth Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 325.

⁵ James Stevens Curl and Susan Wilson, 'sphinx' in *A Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ Morford, Lenardon and Sham, p. 420.

⁷ James Hall, 'sphinx' in *Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London: John Murray, 1996).

through the man's drinking or philandering, the woman's unreasonable or incomprehensible behaviour, or both. It is a deeply cynical assessment of marriage, yet the success of the print depends upon the fate Gillray predicts for the couple being common enough for his pessimism to be shared, or at least understood, by the viewer. Like all effective satire, then, this example is rooted in recognisable truth. The truth that Gillray is asserting in this case will be further discussed below.

Jane Austen loses no time in introducing satire into *Pride and Prejudice*, in a technique similar to Gillray's since it consists in the ironic disconnect between that famous first sentence and the actual circumstances portrayed in the novel. The 'truth universally acknowledged' (I:I) transpires to be no such thing, any more than the 'harmony' in Gillray's image, but is the delusion of Mrs Bennet and her ilk, since the novel's two single men in possession of large fortunes prove resistant, for much of the narrative, to proposing marriage to any one of various prospective wives.⁸ In isolation, Austen's opening statement is merely ironic; it is the cumulative effect of this and similar narrative observations which constitutes satire. This is because a heuristic in *Pride and Prejudice* is that when the narrator generalises, the author is being satirical, one of Austen's targets here being society at large – 'every body' or 'every one' – as represented by the Meryton neighbourhood with its gossip and socially-homogenised opinions. Another example of this is the narrator's comment, after Wickham's fall from grace, that 'All Meryton seemed striving to blacken the man, who, but three months before, had been almost an angel of light' (III:VI). The communal U-turn undertaken by the Meryton herd is emphasised by the antithesis of 'blacken' and 'light', which exemplifies Austen's use of syntactic balance for rhetorical ends.

In all Austen's novels the tone of the narrator complements the character of the heroine. Elizabeth Bennet is one of her most resilient heroines, which allows more scope for satire in *Pride and Prejudice*. The shy Fanny Price would be acutely susceptible to the insolence of Lady Catherine, for instance, and to satirise such encounters would create a much darker tone and even risk accusations of crassness. The narrator's irony in *Pride and Prejudice* is moreover echoed by Elizabeth, who is given a distinctly satirical outlook and who is, like Austen herself, amused by absurdity. The focalising of so much of the novel through Elizabeth's consciousness, partly by extensive use of free indirect discourse, helps to sustain the satire. When Elizabeth tells Jane 'The general prejudice against Mr Darcy is so violent that it would be the death of half the good people in Meryton, to attempt to place him in an amiable light' (II:XVII), the tone is identical to that of the narrator's comment on Wickham above. Both examples also illustrate Austen's use of hyperbole, which is another reliable indicator of her satirical intent.

⁸ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, reissued 2008), p. 1. Further references to *Pride and Prejudice* are from this edition and are given by Volume:Chapter bracketed in the text.

Austen's generalising technique emphasises the centrality of the concept of insiders versus outsiders in satire. Appreciating a piece of satire generates the pleasing sense of sharing the satirist's keen insight, and the wider the target – and it cannot get wider than 'every body' – the more gratifying this becomes. Equally satisfying is to appreciate a piece of satire which has been coded so as to make its recognition dependent on sophisticated knowledge – a technique at which Gillray excels.⁹ Several elements in *Harmony in Matrimony*, particularly those which undermine the ostensible meaning of the title and central image, derive from ancient Greek culture. While it may not require a classical education to see the significance of Eros decimating a dovecote with a blunderbuss, the roles of the sphinx and the satyr are more subtle yet equally important to his narrative, so that its full appreciation will elude anyone who does not recognise these allusions. Gillray habitually used classical references in his prints, and indeed Biblical, Miltonian and Shakespearean ones.¹⁰ Such canonical sources lent authority to the statements he was making with his prints, but they also indicate that this was a hybrid form, mixing low and high cultural modes, and by no means accessible to everyone.¹¹ Gillray's high-quality prints would moreover have been prohibitively expensive for most, selling for up to 13 shillings a piece at a time when five shillings could purchase a coat.¹² Their collection was therefore the hobby of gentlemen, among whom would have numbered the very types of socially and politically-engaged figures who so often featured in them.

The novel at this time, a still-evolving form, was also characterised by hybridity. Claiming that there is satire in *Pride and Prejudice* is not the same as claiming that it is a satirical novel. It is a mix of satire and seriousness, romance and realism. One difference between Austen and Gillray is that Austen made no classical or literary allusions. She had of course not been formally educated in Latin or Greek, but she is likely to have absorbed some knowledge of classics through her interaction with her father and her brothers and from secondary sources. However her avoidance of high-culture references would have made her novels more accessible to those beyond the pale of elite education, including women. The audience for novels was expanding with the spread of subscription libraries, membership of which was still however not cheap. These would not therefore have been frequented by the lower classes, most of whom were in any case still functionally illiterate. While novels were often perceived to be read overwhelmingly by

⁹ David Taylor, 'The Literariness of Graphic Satire' in *The Politics of Parody* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 3-39 (p. 16).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

women this was by no means the case; Austen's own father and brothers read them and they were increasingly being reviewed seriously – by men – in magazines such as the *Critical Review*.^{13 14}

Given that the audiences of both Gillray and Austen would have included the targets of their social satires, there is some irony in the apparent inability of such people to recognise themselves. The Prince Regent was said to be great fan of Austen's despite clues that he may have been lampooned in several of her novels.¹⁵ But as Jonathan Swift pointed out, 'Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders generally discover every body's Face but their Own.'¹⁶ Another explanation is that perception is highly individual, and particularly so when visual or literary content is so equivocal or nuanced that seeing satire in it is arguably subjective. Jane Austen was very conscious of the potential for language to be ambiguous, misleading or misconstrued.¹⁷ By oscillating between third-person narration and what are sometimes only fleeting whispers of free indirect discourse she could leave it deliberately unclear whose perspective the reader should assume, for instance in the reporting of Darcy's indifference to 'all Miss Bingley's witticisms on *fine eyes*' (I:IX). *Harmony in Matrimony* features several ambiguous elements whose interpretation will depend on the viewer. Are the cats on the floor gambolling 'amorously' or fighting?¹⁸ Does the symmetry of the goldfish indicate a balance or a stand-off? Is the book by Ovid which lies open on the round table his *Ars Amatoria* – 'The Art of Love' – or his *Metamorphoses* – more disturbing tales of supernatural change and twists of fate? (Even the romantic-sounding *Ars Amatoria* would have been ambiguous in this context, its chapters on sex making it so famously inappropriate for young ladies that Lydia Languish in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) makes haste to cram her copy 'behind the bolster'.)¹⁹ The butterfly in Gillray's print flutters prettily over the large mirror, but butterflies are connotative of frivolity and mirrors of vanity. A clue to Gillray's intention regarding this last point is that mirrors also formed part of graphic satire's figurative vocabulary of vision: prints often featured telescopes, spectacles, eyes etc., symbolising that satire is a lens through which folly and vice can clearly be seen.²⁰

¹³ Jane Stabler, 'Literary influences' in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 41-50 (p.41).

¹⁴ Mary Waldron, 'Critical responses, early' in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 83-91 (pp. 84-85).

¹⁵ Jocelyn Harris, *Satire, Celebrity and Politics in Jane Austen* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Jonathan Swift, 'The Preface of the Author' in *A Tale of a Tub: To which is added The Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operations of the Spirit*, ed. by A.C. Guthkelch and David Nichol Smith, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 215. <doi:10.1093/actrade/9780198114048.book.1> [accessed 21 December 2019].

¹⁷ Anthony Mandal, 'Language' in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 23-32 (p. 27).

¹⁸ Mary Dorothy George, '10472 Harmony before Matrimony', *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, 11 vols. (Printed by order of the Trustees of the British Museum, 1947), VIII, p. 386.

¹⁹ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Rivals* Act I Scene II (Oxford: Oxford English Drama, 1998, reissued 2008) p. 18.

²⁰ David Taylor, 'Graphic Satire and the Enlightenment Eye' in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 59, Issue 4, December 2017, pp. 34-53 (pp. 34-35).

This metaphor was consistent with the Enlightenment correlation between vision and comprehension, evidenced by Swift's observation above and prominent since Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) which repeatedly compares the mind to an eye.²¹ A similar metaphor was adopted by Ronald Paulson in his conception of satire as 'a house of mirrors in which one theme (or vice) is reflected over and over, with distortion and variations but without essential change'.²² In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen achieves precisely this by showing us a variety of silly women – Mrs Bennet, Lydia, Kitty, Mrs Philips – and a variety of people made ridiculous by their affectations – Lady Catherine, Caroline Bingley and Mr Collins *inter alia* – and persuading us of their folly.

Mr Collins in particular is subjected to the whole gamut of Austen's rhetorical arsenal in the interests of satire. Irony: 'the subject of Lady Catherine elevated him to more than usual solemnity' (I:XIV); understatement: 'Mr Collins was not a sensible man' (I:XV); hyperbole, often channelled through free indirect discourse: 'he had never met with so much attention in the whole course of his life' (I:XV), and many more. Most frequently he is allowed to indict himself through his own speeches, such as his spectacularly tone-deaf proposal to Elizabeth (I:XIX), and through his letters, a stunning example being his comment to Mr Bennet following Lydia's elopement that 'The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this' (III:VI). Meanwhile his delusions about his own character and that of his patroness Lady Catherine create a rich and often hilarious source of dramatic irony. Austen employs a similar range of satirical techniques with her other characters whose degree of self-importance is matched only by their lack of self-knowledge, each incidence contributing to a coherent commentary on a society preoccupied with money and rank, so that when we read *Pride and Prejudice* we are left in almost no doubt as to whom we are invited to condemn and whom to love. 'Almost', since even here the inclinations and perceptiveness of the reader will colour interpretation. Edward Copeland insists that Elizabeth Bennet is motivated by money and materialism, a view supported by Nicola Watson on the basis that Elizabeth tells Jane she first loved Darcy when she saw 'his beautiful grounds at Pemberley' (III:XVII).²³ ²⁴ This demonstrates the danger of isolating Austen's characters' statements from their contexts; one might as well take literally Elizabeth's professed hope of meeting 'with another Mr Collins in time' (III:XIII).

Satire does have a history of being misunderstood. Pamphlet-readers were horrified in 1729 when Jonathan Swift suggested in *A Modest Proposal* that eating babies would solve Irish economic problems, and Jane

²¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Batoche Books, 2000), p. 9; p 20 et al. <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3117747>> [accessed 7 January 2020].

²² In Quintero, p. 7.

²³ Edward Copeland, 'Money' in *A Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* ed. by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 127-143 (pp. 127-128).

²⁴ N. J. Watson, 'Chapter 5: *Pride and Prejudice* then and now' in *Austen and Romantic Writing* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2015), pp. 165-192 (p. 173).

Austen's satire does not seem to have been much appreciated in her own day either.²⁵ Despite women having been early proponents of satire in prose fiction – Delarivier Manley had famously satirised prominent figures of her time – it was persistently regarded as inappropriate for women.²⁶ Austen herself makes sly reference to this in *Sense and Sensibility* and Fanny Burney makes great play of it through the character of Mrs Selwyn in *Evelina*.²⁷ ²⁸ Public affairs were likewise seen as unfeminine and Austen's adoption of the romantic novel with the primarily domestic setting as her genre restricted the type and degree of satire she could use. *Pride and Prejudice* is more Horace than Juvenal; light-hearted ridicule rather than savage contempt, of human frailty and absurdity rather than the dark immorality of specific individuals. Gillray's tone in *Harmony before Matrimony* is similarly Horatian, although in his political caricatures his criticism was far more abrasive.

Austen's genre presented her with another consideration which did not affect Gillray: the importance of not allowing the satire to detract from her audience's emotional engagement. Sharply-sketched caricatures are therefore countered by well-rounded characters with whom the reader can sympathise and whose narratives also reinforce points made by the satire. For satire always makes a point (although rarely offers a solution). In these examples Gillray's and Austen's points overlap in that both criticise the contemporary institution of marriage.

Gillray shows us the fashionable preoccupations of an elegant couple and implies that the pair are utterly unprepared for the realities of wedlock. This was a theme taken up by many contemporary writers who bemoaned the impracticality of an education limited to music, dancing and French for girls destined for marriage.²⁹ It was reinforced by Gillray himself in a follow-up print entitled *Matrimonial Harmonics* (Fig.2) and featuring the same couple, in which the woman thumps on a piano and sings loudly, ignoring the kettle which boils on the unattended tea-table, the nanny who holds out her bawling child, and the man, who blocks his ears and buries himself in his newspaper.

Austen's focus (as well as being on the manifestations and effects of pride, or the want of it) is on the difficulties and humiliations women face in their necessary quest to find husbands. The satirical presentation of this theme through the outrageous behaviour of her larger-than-life characters and through the opinionated rumour-mongering of 'every one' is reinforced by realism. This is manifest in the serious

²⁵ Mary Waldron, p. 84.

²⁶ Christopher Bertucci, 'Contagious Desire as Feminist Satire in Delarivier Manley's *The Royal Mischief* in *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700*, vol. 41 no. 1, 2017, p. 81-99. <doi:10.1353/rst.2017.0015> [accessed 6 January 2020].

²⁷ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, reissued 2008), p. 184 (II:XIV).

²⁸ Fanny Burney, *Evelina*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, reissued 2008), p.284 ((III:III); p. 361 (III:XVI).

²⁹ Janet Todd, 'The Literary Context' in *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen* ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 18-35 (p.23). <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=273662> [accessed 25 November 2019].

handling of such episodes as Jane’s miserable ostracisation by Bingley’s snobbish sisters in London and Charlotte’s depressingly pragmatic attitude to her marriage to Mr Collins, who was ‘neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband’ (I:XXII).

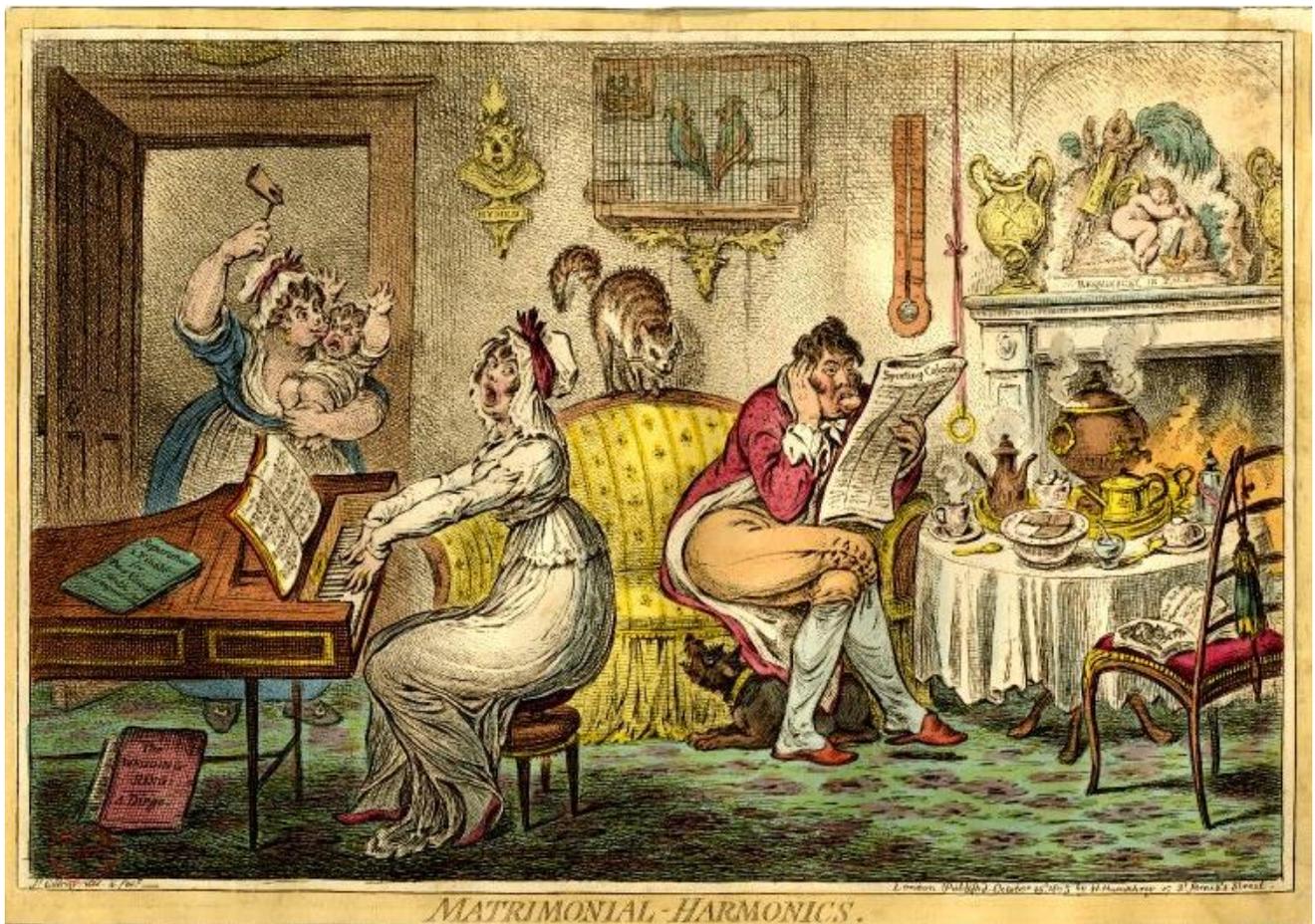


Figure 2: James Gillray, *Matrimonial Harmonics* (1805), hand-coloured etching, 25.6 × 36cm (British Museum, London; © Trustees of the British Museum)

As different therefore as the early nineteenth-century novel was from the caricature print in terms of form, each could be a highly effective vehicle for the conveyance of satire, demonstrating the extraordinary versatility of this witty method of criticism. Gillray and Austen utilised parallel visual and literary techniques to elucidate their similarly clear-eyed perspectives on the issue of marriage. If Austen’s satire is less obvious than Gillray’s, this reflects not only the expectations of her sex and her genre but perhaps also the fact that she did not write ‘for such dull Elves | As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves’.³⁰

³⁰ Jane Austen, ‘To Cassandra Austen, Friday, 29th January 1813’ in *Selected Letters*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, reissued 2009) pp. 136-138 (p.137).

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