

## “Truth Universally Acknowledged”

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The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is, of course, one of the most famous first lines in literature. The ironic contrasts between what it seems to be saying and the realities of the matrimonial marketplace it refers to, and between the seemingly grave tone of its opening and the comic deflation of its conclusion, have been delighting readers since 1813. To the reader of 1813, however, the verbal wit of the sentence was even sharper than it is for us today, for in the opening phrase of the sentence Jane Austen is deliberately echoing what her contemporaries would recognize as the language of eighteenth-century philosophical discourse in order to enhance her comic impact.

References to the *consensus gentium* similar in phrasing to her “it is a truth universally acknowledged” are extremely common in philosophical works known to Jane Austen and her contemporaries. “It is a received opinion that language has no other end but the communicating ideas,” writes Bishop Berkeley in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710).<sup>1</sup> For David Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), “’tis universally allowed, that the capacity of the human mind is limited.”<sup>2</sup> And Adam Smith, in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)—a work to which Elizabeth Bennet alludes and from which Mary Bennet plagiarizes—remarks that when “general rules . . . are universally acknowledged and established . . . we frequently appeal to them as to the standards of judgement.”<sup>3</sup> By actually echoing the language associated with prestigious philosophers of the day Jane Austen enhances the comic deflation that takes place between the opening and closing of her sentence. For an audience familiar with works like the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, what appears to be the beginning of a philosophical proposition turns into burlesque as the sentence progresses. “It is a truth universally acknowledged” (echoes of Hume and Smith in the reader’s ear, how impressive) “that a single man in possession of a good fortune” (well . . .) “must be in want of” (yes . . .) “a wife” (?!)

How wonderful it is to work with an author who, after the closest study, and a hundred readings, still has a trick up her sleeve for the hundred-and-first.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1790), p. 397. For Elizabeth’s and Mary’s references to Smith see my “The Bennet Girls and Adam Smith on Vanity and Pride,” *Philological Quarterly*, 46 (1967), 567-569.