In the Pride of the Moment
ENCOUNTERS IN JANE AUSTEN'S WORLD

JOHN A. DUSSINGER
John A. Dussinger argues that the strength of Jane Austen’s writing is found in the minute encounters that reveal a character’s life rather than in the larger design of the story. In the Pride of the Moment contests the familiar view that Austen’s novels are stylistically polished but lacking in substance by showing that they give unusual significance to the most ordinary events.

Austen’s narrative strategy brings her characters together in an encounter, a radically focused interaction revealing nuances of behavior. The encounter conveys symbolically the participants’ attitudes and intentions, and if the nominal activity in the scene is significant in forming political alignments, it also defines the alienation of the individuals outside that frame of reference. Such deliberately choreographed performances reinforce the idea that the principal action in Austen’s world is talking. The most immediate quality of such oral communication is the sense of its circumstantial uniqueness, its ability to place a character both as a social-class member and as an individual.

When Austen began writing in the 1790s, she had available ample models in Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliffe, and many other authors in the Steventon parsonage; but most striking from the first juvenile spoofs to her last, incomplete novel is her radically critical eye toward literary form in general and novelistic discourse in particular. Dussinger asserts that Austen, like these eighteenth-century novelists, found that imitating speech was a form of parody, and she employed it to ridicule affected social behavior as well as such literary fads as Gothic horror.

But Austen is the first English novelist to grasp the full implications of parody
In the Pride of the Moment
For Astrid, Karin, and Camilla
I do not write for such dull elves

As have not a great deal of ingenuity themselves.

—Chawton, 29 January 1813