I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb. (PP, 91)

As everyone knows, *Pride and Prejudice* was first composed as an epistolary novel, and in that form, its title was *First Impressions*. It is the story of two protagonists who, through various shades of pride and prejudice, retain their first, inaccurate impressions of one another long after those initial judgments should have been adjusted or discarded. The best sociological analyst of first impressions is Erving Goffman, who addresses the topic in his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where he observes that first impressions are not just important, but crucial: “When the interaction that is initiated by ‘first impressions’ is itself merely the initial interaction in an extended series of interactions involving the same participants, we speak of ‘getting off on the right foot’ and feel that it is crucial that we do so.”¹ If we get off on the wrong foot, as Elizabeth and Darcy certainly do, “all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomy that is generated when the minute social

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¹ J. Thompson, *Jane Austen and Modernization* © James Thompson 2015
system of face-to-face interaction breaks down” (PS, 12). Such reactions characterize much of the first half of Pride and Prejudice, all the way through Darcy’s letter of explanation. At the very end of his life, Goffman returned to the subject of first impressions in “Social Interaction and Social Structure,” the presidential address to the American Sociological Association that he did not live to present:

There are people-processing encounters, encounters in which the “impression” subjects make during the interaction affects their life chances. The institutionalized example is the placement interview as conducted by school counselors, personnel department psychologists, psychiatric diagnosticians, and courtroom officials. In a less candid form, this processing is ubiquitous; everyone is a gatekeeper in regard to something. Thus, friendship relationships and marital bonds (at least in our society) can be traced back to an occasion in which something more was made of an incidental contact than need have been.²

Here is a more comic understanding of first impressions, one more suited to understand courtship and marriage narratives, which must, perforce, have an initial impression that sparks further encounter and attraction, especially if, as in Much Ado about Nothing, She Stoops to Conquer, Pride and Prejudice, and thousands of romcoms like When Harry met Sally, the first impression is disastrous. Both Austen and Goffman are attentive to the first impression because they both hold that such encounters are neither accidental nor entirely improvisational, but rather a crucial test case of social form—how well each participant understands and observes the rules. For both novelist and sociologist, things get really interesting when people or subjects or characters who should know better fail to follow the rules, and what follows in both is acute analysis of the breakdown.

Erving Goffman makes an appropriate intellectual companion for Jane Austen not simply because he is the finest writer in all of sociology, with a witty and sly style that has provoked more than one commentator to wonder why he never wrote novels, nor is it that his work is so strikingly literary, with illustrations and examples from